

INTRODUCTION TO
THEOLOGY
—FOR—
MINISTRY

ELAINE A. ROBINSON



Introduction to Theology for Ministry

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Introduction to Theology for Ministry

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CONTENTS

Introduction 1

1. What Is Theology? 11

The Limits of Our Knowledge of God 16

The Broader and Narrower Meanings of *Theology* 19

The Development of the Word *Theology* 22

Questions for Reflection 30

Resources for Further Study 31

2. How Did Theology Develop? 33

Theology, Doctrine, and Dogma 35

Motivations for Doing Theology 39

Periods of Theological Activity 43

Questions for Reflection 73

Resources for Further Study 74

3. How Do We Do Theology? 75

Theological Language 76

Theological Method: Criteria, Norm, and Sources 83

Central Concerns or Starting Points for Theology 118

Questions for Reflection 120

Resources for Further Study 120

4. What Do We Believe? 123

I Believe 127

I Believe in God 131

I Believe in Jesus Christ 145

I Believe in the Holy Spirit 164

I Believe in the Church 169

I Believe in the Last Things 181

The Doctrine of Humanity 185

Questions for Reflection 191

Resources for Further Study 192

Conclusion 193

Index 197

INTRODUCTION

Many years ago, while serving as the pastor of a small, rural church in Georgia, I received a phone call informing me that Dan's nephew had committed suicide. Dan and his family had been members of this United Methodist congregation for decades, though his nephew—like many in their extended family—belonged to a nearby Baptist church. When I arrived at Dan and Linda's house, the first question Dan asked was, "Is my nephew going to hell? Doesn't someone who kills himself go straight to hell?"

It was not only a moment of pastoral care, but equally, it was an important theological moment. Dan, in his grief, needed more than comfort or platitudes. He needed a thoughtful, soul-satisfying response from his pastor. No pat answers such as "It is God's will" or "All things work together for our good" would do in such a heart-wrenching moment; certainly not the trite and ill-conceived "God needed another angel." Such simplistic phrases have no place in the minister's vocabulary. Would God will someone's suicide? Was there really good to be presumed in the nephew's tragic death? Would the God of life welcome the death of someone for the sake of having another angel in heaven? Pat answers simply do not hold up under scrutiny. They often do more harm than good. And they reflect a superficiality that does a disservice to God and the life of faith. The work of ministry deserves more. The call of God demands more.

That day, I began to share a theologically informed response, which

I expanded upon for the whole congregation in that Sunday's sermon. Although we cannot know with certainty what lies beyond this life, I explained, there are several important biblical and theological claims that give us clues in addressing the suicide of a young person. Above all, we know that God is love—that God came to bring life and that abundantly, not death—and we hope in the knowledge that God loves us first and continuously in all our human frailties. We also know that suicide is usually caused by mental illness and that God never punishes us for being ill. As John Wesley explained, in our lifetime, even as we pursue Christian perfection in love, we can never be entirely free of ignorance, mistakes, infirmities, or temptation.¹ These things are part and parcel of being human. Of course, the full response to the question of whether the nephew was going to hell required a lengthier response as well as an admission that we simply cannot know what lies beyond this life, but we place our hope in the promises of God.

In my response to that pastoral situation—and many others over the years of ministry—I needed the help of theology, of Christian teachings about the nature of God, humanity, eschatology or the last things, Christology, and a host of other theological considerations. I had to draw upon the best resources of the theological tradition to offer a thoughtful, faith-furthering answer to a difficult question. Indeed, the more I have studied theology, the better I have become at preaching, teaching, and ministry on behalf of Christ in a suffering world. Theology is among the greatest gifts that God has given to the ministry of the church. In fact, without theology there would be no ministry, no faith, no ability to think about and articulate the meaning of the living God at work in the world. Theology is the substance of our lives in God, whether we are conscious of its presence and function or largely unaware of its influence.

1 John Wesley, "Christian Perfection," in *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology*, edited by Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 70–73.

The word *theology* comes from the Greek words *theos* (God) and *logos* (word, discourse). Literally, we could define *theology* as words about God or the study of God and the things of faith. It is a reflective process in which we consider the beliefs or teachings (doctrines) of the Christian faith, how they relate one to another, how they developed, and how they are applied and practiced in each generation anew. To study theology is to undertake a journey that engages our hearts, minds, spirits, and bodies as we grow in understanding and in accepting the mystery that shrouds the fullness of God. As finite human beings, we do not possess the capacity to grasp the fullness of God. Psalm 8, for example, declares, “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, / the moon and the stars that you have established; / what are human beings that you are mindful of them, / mortals that you care for them?” (Ps 8:3–4). Similarly, Paul writes to the Corinthians that we “see in a mirror, dimly” (1 Cor 13:12), as our human understanding is limited by our finitude. Like the universe that surrounds our planet, God is wider and deeper and vastly more complex than is evident from our small place on the earth. Theology is like a telescope peering into the farthest reaches of the cosmos, glimpsing unfathomable wonders, yet unable to grasp and know the universe fully. Like the astronomer, we cannot know the full expanse of the subject of our study; but if we continue to search, study, and learn about God, we will discover new mysteries and wonders, and we will be better prepared for the challenges of ministry.

Of course, as with any human endeavor, there may also be moments when we feel threatened, discouraged, or unsettled and wish only to cling to the comfort and familiarity of the solid ground, the clarity and nearness of those things that seem to provide security and certainty. Consider the text of Matthew 14:22–33, when the disciples find themselves on a rough sea and, after a long night, are shocked to see Jesus come toward them, walking on the water. Most of the

disciples cling to the side of the boat, maybe even settle deeper into the hull. Can you imagine them peering tentatively over the side? They presume to know already what is possible, true, and real. But not Peter. He takes the risk of faith to climb out and step onto the water, yearning to draw nearer to Jesus. Of course, when he forgets that this journey is about God and the power of God at work in human lives, he slips and becomes frightened. Jesus does not let him sink, but reaches out and lifts him up again to continue the journey of drawing closer to the living God in mind, body, spirit, and heart. In taking a risk, Peter steps out of his comfort zone and grows in his knowledge and experience of the living God.

Peter's longing to go deeper and his willingness to step out of his comfort zone for the sake of growing his faith, provide a model for our journey into theology. Many persons choose to stay within the safe confines of the theology they learned as children in Sunday school. But the human being is created with a capacity to learn, grow, and mature across a lifetime. The Gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus himself began to study as a young boy, and grew in "wisdom and in years" (Luke 2:52) before beginning his ministry to the world. Moreover, Jesus was always asking questions. Those of us who take the risk of faith and, like Peter, get out of the boat and take a few bold steps to know Christ more fully, will mature as disciples of Jesus Christ. Our thirst for God will become stronger and bolder. Our hunger for God will not be easily satisfied by the ordinary diet of platitudes such as "Jesus loves you" or "it is God's will." We will want to know what it means to say that Jesus loves us or that something is God's will. We will want to know what that looks like in practice and in our human lives. Those of us willing and eager to get out of the boat will discover an unimaginable beauty in the mystery and complexity of life in God, a hunger and thirst that will grow in its longing for a fuller relationship with God. The journey of discovery never ends while we have life and breath. As Saint Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo,

wrote in his *Confessions* centuries ago, our hearts are restless until they rest in God.

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If you thirst and hunger to know God more
deeply, then the study of theology will fill
you with delight and excitement.

No matter how much we study, we can never know God in full. Yet we are called to study, learn, and understand as much as possible. Paradoxically, however, it often proves true that the more we learn the more we realize how much we have yet to learn and understand about God and the faith we believe and practice. We have to live in the midst of mystery, ambiguity, and not having all the answers; indeed, this is the heart of choosing to travel by faith. If your heart is restless, if your mind thirsts and hungers to know the living God more deeply, then the study of theology will fill you with delight and excitement. Theology will energize you and equip you for more compassionate and thoughtful ministry. In the pages that follow, we will begin this journey of consciously exploring our theology. Although we can only begin to study the vast reality that is God, this small volume should provide you with a map to chart a course to encounter the wonders of theology.

Our starting point, then, is the practice often called “critical reflection.” *Critical* does not mean that we disapprove of the beliefs we encounter; the word is not used pejoratively. Rather, critical reflection implies that we take our life in God so seriously that we are compelled to carefully examine our faith and our teachings, to test the spirits, in a manner of speaking. Another way of understanding critical reflection is through the terminology offered by Stone and Duke in their helpful introduction to theological reflection, *How to Think Theologically*.

Stone and Duke differentiate between “embedded theology” and “deliberative theology.”² Embedded theology is, at heart, the preconceived notions we hold about God and the life of faith, but without conscious consideration of these beliefs. We may have learned them in church, from our families, from television preachers, or even by means of social media. The source of these deeply held assumptions can be wide and varied, but our embedded theology has not been brought to light and carefully considered.

By contrast, deliberative theology is a form of questioning, of inquiring about those beliefs we hold. For example, if we often respond to situations with the phrase “It is God’s will,” deliberative theology will begin to ask questions. Why would God will such a thing? Are there competing claims about what God’s will might be, such as God’s desire that we might have life abundantly? What about human free will? Does it play a role in situations? These represent just a few questions we might begin to ask when engaging in deliberative theology. When we examine our beliefs, rather than casting doubt upon them, we more faithfully seek the living God. We are humbled before the mystery and immensity of the divine. We recognize that the life of faith is a journey of discovery and, just like Jesus with his disciples, we are asked to question and consider what it means to believe in God, follow Christ, and serve others in a world that is far from perfect. We honor the living God by engaging in the practice of deliberative theology and seeking to know the Triune God more fully. Indeed, Jesus was the master questioner, always urging the people of God to think more carefully about their faith in God, never letting them rest comfortably in unexamined teachings. Through his use of parables, Jesus often left a particular point up in the air, ensuring that his hearers would continue to reflect upon and wonder about the meaning of his teaching.

2 Howard W. Stone and James O. Duke, *How to Think Theologically*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).

Throughout this book, I will introduce you to theological vocabulary. These are key words or ideas with which you should be familiar, and they are defined in the text as they are introduced. As with any discipline or area of study, the more fluent we are in the vocabulary, the easier the subject matter becomes. I encourage you to pause on the key terms and develop a working definition in your own mind. If need be, consult a theological dictionary or textbook to clarify the definition. This practice will go a long way toward your development of a deliberative theology.

In chapter 1, we will spend some time defining theology and mapping out the various branches of theological inquiry. Then in chapter 2, our journey takes us through a brief history of how the church's doctrines have developed, with key questions and thinkers introduced. You will find an occasional excerpt from the writings of a key theologian, so that you might begin to grasp how reading theology can be more than an intellectual exercise; it can be a spiritual practice. This overview of some of the streams of theology that are present in our churches and world today should help you to locate your own United Methodist starting point for doing theology. We will refer to these streams as "theological movements." In chapter 3, we begin to explore the structure of theological reflection or the sources and methods for articulating our faith. As Jesus says in the Gospel of Luke 14:28, "For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost . . . ?" In doing theology, we want to understand the materials needed and sketch a basic pattern for our theological journey before we begin to construct it. Chapter 3 also includes a discussion of the importance of language to theology and what I refer to as "expansive" language when speaking of God. Then in chapter 4, we turn to a basic overview of the "content" of the Christian faith, the doctrines or doctrinal loci that provide a systematic arrangement of our beliefs. Not only will we sketch the basic teachings of the Christian faith, with attention to good United Methodist

doctrine, but our goal is also to see the relevance of these teachings for today. This journey is not intended to tell you what or how to believe, but to give you the tools to articulate your own most deeply held beliefs about God and the life of faith and to assess whether your beliefs are consistent with the community of believers we call United Methodist. This goal is the heart of theology: to enable each person to express for himself or herself a thoughtful, careful understanding of the Christian faith from where he or she stands in the world and to know which community of faith holds the beliefs he or she values most deeply. Finally, at various points along the way in this study, you will find expressions of pastoral situations where good theological reflection is indispensable. These examples are intended to help you begin to formulate your own theological responses to the particularities of your ministry setting.

Finally, a word about the method used here for citing United Methodist sources. As Wesley's sermons are available in multiple editions and online, I have chosen to simply provide the sermon title along with the section and paragraph from which a quote is taken. When quoting from the *Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (the *Discipline*), I provide the reader with the section of the *Discipline* from which the quotation is drawn, but have chosen not to cite paragraph or page number for two reasons. First, as we all recognize, the *Discipline* is revised every four years, which means these specific references could become outdated fairly quickly. But since the content of the sections on "Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task" are not likely to change significantly, locating material within these pages should not prove difficult. Second, I encourage readers to familiarize themselves with these sections of the *Discipline*, which will serve as an aid to learning and remembering United Methodist doctrine.

The depths of the heavens, stars and planets and galaxies, surround us. The vastness of the cosmos stretches into unimaginable silence and wonders. Our eyes scan the horizon, humbled by the

grandeur of God's creation. We settle in, adjust the telescope, and begin to scan the mysteries before us. Our journey into theology has now begun.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What does *theology* mean? How have you already been doing theology, even before picking up this book?
2. What is the difference between "embedded" and "deliberative" theology? Can you think of a time when you engaged in deliberative theology? What led you into that reflective mode, and where did it take you?
3. Can you think of an example when Jesus used critical reflection to help bring to light some form of embedded "theology" (an anachronistic usage) among the people of ancient Palestine?
4. What excites you about beginning the study of theology? What fears might you bring to this journey?

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

- Harvey, Van A. *A Handbook of Theological Terms: Their Meaning and Background Exposed in over 300 Articles*. New York: Touchstone, 1997 (or another dictionary of theological terms).
- Stone, Howard W., and James O. Duke. *How to Think Theologically*, third edition. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013.

WHAT IS THEOLOGY?

Each year, pastors ask their congregations for financial commitments, pledges for their tithing and giving in the coming year. We expect that faithful disciples will be generous with their resources. But new believers and lifelong church members alike often want to know why churches seem to focus on money and giving. We can quickly offer up practical reasons, such as the heat and the lights and salaries. But aren't there deeper reasons, arising out of the faithfulness of God, that lie at the heart of our generosity? The Gospel of Luke tells the story of a poor widow (Luke 21:1-4). Jesus is at the temple watching "rich people putting their gifts into the treasury"—something akin to placing our tithes and other gifts into the offering plate. Then he sees a "poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.'" Jesus is not suggesting we should give everything we have to the church. But he is telling us something deeply theological about our faith and our relationship to money. Our generosity stems from, not our earning power, but our relationship with the God who has given us all that we possess, including our very lives. Tithing isn't about the church. It is about the very nature of God.

Jesus was a theologian. The apostle Paul was a theologian. John

Wesley, too, was a theologian. Although none of them used the term to describe himself, each was engaged in the practice of theology, having studied at length the scriptures and teachings of their ancestors in the faith. As early as the age of twelve, Jesus was found studying at the feet of the rabbis (Luke 2:46), and throughout his ministry he engaged people in understanding God and the life of faith more deeply, though never unambiguously. Speaking often in parables, Jesus left the disciples to ponder just what he meant and what the kingdom of God really looks like. As for Paul, we know he was a Pharisee of Pharisees, a teacher of and expert in the law, with years of training in the beliefs held and practiced by first-century Judaism. He is widely considered to be the first Christian theologian, as his letters so often provide us with theological insights into the life of faith. John Wesley, too, was a deeply learned man who studied the scriptures and Christian teachings throughout his lifetime, imparting to others those he considered to represent best the fullness of God and our lives in God. While none of them can be thought of as a “systematic” theologian in the contemporary sense, all of them were thinking theologically. All of them were theologians who shared the teachings of God with the people of faith.

Theology (Greek: *theos* + *logos*) is the study of God, our language or discourse about and reflection upon God and the Christian faith as a whole. It is an intellectual examination and accounting of what Christians believe, with an eye toward how we practice that faith in the world. Our theology becomes expressed in our lives through our embodied practices; what we do and say provides some clues into what we believe, whether or not we are aware of those beliefs. As pastors, our goal is to move from an embedded, unconscious theology toward an increasingly deliberative one, in order to intentionally form the people of God as disciples. When we speak of “God,” the divine mystery that is deeper and wider than our human understanding and imagination, we are encouraged to remember that all of our thinking

and speaking about the life of faith emanates from this one reality we call God. To use a scriptural phrase, God is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end of all that exists. Thus, the study of God can be thought of as the study of the whole of the life of faith. Everything we teach and believe as Christians is, at heart, theology or God-talk.

But why do we teach about God and enter into theological reflection? Isn't it enough to simply repeat phrases and words we have heard from others? Perhaps the best answer is this: We consider the life of faith and the fullness of this divine reality in order to make sense of our lives in this world and to share this knowledge or wisdom with others so that lives might be transformed. We want to know who God is, who we are, how to live a good and full life, and what we are called to be and to do. All of our theological reflection, then, is a process of meaning-making and giving life. To understand who God is and how we relate to the divine is to make our lives meaningful, to make sense out of this human journey, to help further life as it is intended to be lived. When we know how to live, then we have the possibility of living life fully and joyfully. We might say that our theology gives us a way of viewing and relating to the world so we can live abundantly. Christians believe that this is the way that leads to life, and to live in this way, we must consider whether what we say and do is faithful to those things Jesus taught and to the fullness of the scriptural witnesses. Without careful reflection, we are always in danger of offering our own world-view rather than the truthfulness of God's way. Without careful reflection, we may offer theological claims that are not consistent with the doctrines and beliefs of the body of believers we call United Methodists, even though we have promised to be accountable to the doctrinal standards of The United Methodist Church. In other words, our theology forms the very heart of our ministry, for good or for ill.

In the introduction, we distinguished between embedded and deliberative theology. The study of theology enables us to become conscious of our most deeply held beliefs and to ask ourselves if they

are actually making sense of the world and being faithful to God, especially in light of what we know to be true about God from the scriptures, tradition, reason, and experience. Take the example of someone who uses the phrase “It is God’s will” as a response to everything that happens. The person finds a ten-dollar bill, and it is deemed to be God’s will. He runs into an old friend at the grocery store: God’s will. He gets a new job: God’s will. He helps someone change a flat tire: God’s will. He learns of a soldier’s death: God’s will. A neighbor’s child dies tragically: God’s will. The next town is destroyed by a flood: God’s will. It is easy to ascribe everything that happens in our lives to God and God’s will, but such a response reflects embedded, unexamined theology. It might express a belief in an extreme form of predestination, in which all things are predetermined by God without human response. Such a position would not accord with United Methodist theology. Let’s explore how this response to the various situations of our lives might unravel as we begin to ask questions about and reflect upon God, the human condition, and the world in which we live.

If we consider, for a moment, the most extreme sort of tragedy, what are the questions we might want to ask? Imagine a tornado sweeps through a town and levels neighborhood after neighborhood, resulting in the loss of life and the destruction of countless homes and businesses. What does it say about God to suggest that this sort of devastation is God’s will? It would suggest, at the very least, that God seeks to destroy and bring death. Now we need to ask: Why would God send Jesus into the world to redeem it, only to wreak great pain and suffering upon everyone, indiscriminately? Doesn’t this contradict the scriptural claims that God is love, that God intends abundant life, that God is good, that God is just? Given that we know something of God’s nature, how does it make sense to suggest that a tornado of such tremendous destructive force is God’s will?

So, if not simply God’s will, then what about punishment? We have all heard Christian interpreters who claim that such destructive

events are God's punishment for one supposed societal sin or another. Indeed, this was the view held by John Wesley following the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, when he argued that God must be punishing the Portuguese for the Inquisition. If Wesley believed this to be true, shouldn't we? Of course, Wesley was a fallible human being; he was not Jesus, but an interpreter of the faith in his own context. When we begin to question this claim of punishment in the light of what we know to be true about God, the pronouncement begins to unravel.

Does a punishing God indiscriminately take the lives of the guilty and innocent alike? Doesn't God view all sin as disobedience? Why would God single out one form of sin over any other? What is sin anyway? Why is the particular human condition that the television evangelist passionately dislikes, the one God seems to punish the most? Doesn't the Bible say, judge not that ye be not judged? Doesn't it seem strange that God, out of deep love, would send Jesus Christ to redeem us, but then continue to use death and destruction as a means of punishment? What about Jesus' own words that he came to bring life and that abundantly? When we ask careful and thoughtful questions in relationship to what we know from the scriptures, our Christian heritage, our experience, and by means of reasoned analysis—what has been called in United Methodism the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral"—when we move toward deliberate theology, we begin to recognize that, perhaps, it isn't God's will or God's punishment, but rather, something else quite tragic is going on. Does your faith include a belief in a fallen world, which God in Christ is working to restore? Does your faith include a belief in natural evil apart from moral evil? Perhaps the tornado isn't God's will or God's punishment for one supposed sin after all, but points toward the reality of a world that is not yet the new creation and continues to be riddled with suffering and evil.

In these few paragraphs, we have only begun to think theologically about this phrase, "It is God's will," and how deliberative

theology, our conscious examination of our beliefs, begins to unravel the phrase's ability to make sense of our world. In these paragraphs, you have already started to explore questions of theodicy (the problem of evil), natural evil, the nature of God, Christology, and eschatology (the last things). At this point, several things should be clear:

- ◆ First, our *unexamined* beliefs and expressions of faith can do as much harm as good.
- ◆ Second, we are all theologians in a very real sense. We are all speaking of and trying to make sense of God and God's presence and will for humanity and the whole of creation. We are trying to make sense of our human lives. Yet the quality and faithfulness of our theological reflection may differ greatly.
- ◆ Third, the more carefully we begin to explore questions of faith, the more exciting, meaningful, and faithful our Christian journey becomes. Rather than somehow undermining our faith, this process of asking questions leads us into a deeper and richer relationship with God, as well as a more fulfilling life in the world. It makes us better able to be in ministry to others. We might say, to use a Pauline reference, we take on the "mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16).

Having whetted your appetite to think theologically, I want to help you grasp how this practice of theology entered into common usage among Christians, as well as to distinguish the different ways the word is used, since the ambiguity can sometimes lead to confusion among new students of theology.

■ THE LIMITS OF OUR KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

I teach in a seminary, preparing students for full-time ministries of the church. Sometimes, as seminarians begin this process of preparation, they find the term *theology* quite confusing, and rightly so. While the study of theology is an engaging and exciting process and crucial to

the life of ministry, it can also be difficult. This kind of critical, reflective thinking may be new to many entering into the study of theology, especially those who have not previously studied the humanities and philosophy.

Because God is Spirit and infinite, we are unable to directly observe and describe the divine reality. Historically, this has been expressed by the Latin phrase used by John Calvin, *finitum non est capax infiniti*, and translated as “the finite cannot contain the infinite.” We are limited in our physical and intellectual capacities as well as by time and space, but God is limitless. We are, each of us, a little container of life that can hold only a sliver of the fullness of God within. As a result, the language we use to speak of God is always “indirect,” or by way of metaphor and analogy (a subject to which we will return in chapter 3). For this reason, some students find theology to be abstract. And for those who seek to be taught “the” answer to difficult theological questions, theology becomes disappointing, since the deeper we dig, the fewer absolute answers we are able to formulate and the more questions we are compelled to ask. Of course, this sense of uncertainty and mystery should not surprise us, given that we human beings are finite, limited creatures and, as 1 Corinthians 13:12 reminds us, we see in a mirror dimly and know only in part. In this life, our understanding is necessarily limited by our creatureliness, and we are called to remain humble and open before the vastness that is God and the life of faith. If you find yourself struggling with the abstract nature of theology, wanting more concrete answers and certainty, it may be helpful to remind yourself of this Pauline claim that we see only in part. We are not created with the capacity to understand the fullness of God, though we are able to grasp the contours of what God has revealed to humanity through the scriptures and Jesus of Nazareth. We are able to touch only the hem of God’s garment, much like Isaiah’s vision of encountering the living God in the temple (Isa 6:1).

Thus, we human creatures, gifted with consciousness and yearning

to know God, can never become like God, having complete knowledge and understanding. One of the most poignant stories in the Bible is found in Genesis 2:4–3:24, the second creation story and what we traditionally refer to as “the fall,” in which the man and woman together commit the original sin or the first act of turning away from God. It is an etiological tale that answers the question: How did we get into the human situation in which we find ourselves? In early generations and sometimes, unfortunately, in the present day, the “blame” has often been placed upon the woman who actually took fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the middle of the Garden, in what we might identify as a sin of commission. But the text clearly states that she gave some to the man “who was with her” as if to indicate that he was watching passively, thereby committing a sin of omission. They are both culpable. But perhaps the most important point of this story has nothing to do with who is responsible for the fall. Rather, it has to do with the human desire to become “like God, knowing good and evil” (3:5), for after they eat, the man and woman do, indeed, recognize there is good and evil. But the fact that they immediately cover their nakedness, as if suddenly discovering the human body is no longer good, tells us they are unable to discern with certainty which is which, which is good and which is evil.

Down through the ages, Christians have debated and continue to debate whether one thing or another is good or evil in God’s sight. From the beginning, then, human beings have sought certainty and complete knowledge of God, but the Bible indicates we are not capable of knowing the fullness of God. And so, we enter into the practice of theological reflection, seeking to draw as near as possible to the reality of God and the right way to live as followers of Jesus Christ, but in an attitude of humility that recognizes we can never arrive at perfect and complete knowledge. We might just get some things wrong or not see the whole picture, much like the first people in the Garden. No matter how many years we might study theology, the knowledge of

God remains somewhat elusive, and our eyes are continually opened to see anew the heights and depths of God.

■ THE BROADER AND NARROWER MEANINGS OF *THEOLOGY*

Theology can also be confusing simply because the term is used in a variety of ways. In contemporary usage, theology can refer, in a broader and more general sense, to all of the studies we undertake in preparation for various ministries. In its narrower usage, theology refers to a specific area of study more precisely known as “systematic theology.” In this section, we explore the several ways in which the word *theology* may be used in the course of theological or ministry studies, as well as provide a brief historical overview of the development of this term, academic discipline, and ministry skill known as theology. Although this book focuses on introducing the academic discipline of theology—commonly referred to as systematic theology—mapping the larger terrain of theological studies will enable us to better navigate the meanings and complexity of this word and practice.

As is true of many words, the meaning of theology has evolved and expanded over the centuries. The word *awful* is a good example. Up through the eighteenth century and even into the nineteenth, *awful* was used to express the condition of being “filled with awe.”¹ This is how John Wesley would have used the word. Today, of course, *awful* tends to express something undesirable or decidedly bad, though we do still speak of having an “awfully good time,” which reflects the earlier usage. In more contemporary parlance, in some circles the word *bad* has come to mean exactly the opposite: something deemed really bad is actually quite good. Thus, understanding the meaning

1 For example, Samuel Johnson’s *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1785) defines *awful* as “that which strikes with awe, or fills with reverence.” https://archive.org/stream/dictionary_ofengl01johnuoft#page/n207 (accessed May 23, 2017).

of any word in a particular time or culture is of great importance. So often we use words, especially in sharing our faith, which lack precision or which we do not fully understand. Ask people at your Sunday school class or a Bible study to define *grace* or ask them what *worship* is, and you will get a sense of the uncertainty. Our faith depends in many ways on grasping the deeper meaning of our language of faith. Our growth as disciples depends, in part, on sharpening our understanding, such that, when I'm preaching and use a word such as *grace* or *sanctification*, I make sure to define it so as to help the congregation grow. Since God cannot be apprehended directly with our physical senses, the words we use about God are of primary importance.

When and how, then, did the word *theology* enter into our language as the common way of referring to the study of the teachings of the Christian faith? Although the word *theology* is Greek in origin and also found in the Latin writings of the early Christian theologians, it is not found in the New Testament. Rather it arose out of the need to make sense of the biblical witnesses and the teachings of the early church. Some readers might react to this knowledge by saying, "If it is not in the Bible, then why would we use or care about this word?" It is a good question, and one that has been asked for generations in various forms. As you might suspect, the answer is a bit complicated.

First, we develop words to help us better articulate the Christian faith. *Trinity* is a good example. The biblical witnesses never use this word to speak of God, yet we Christians understand that the one true God is known to us in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (sometimes, today, we say Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer to name the three persons). This Trinity is how God has revealed God's self to us, in and through the scriptural witnesses. Yet, because the scriptures do not provide a word or language to describe this reality, early Christians began to name God as a Trinity and, more important, to express how God can be known in three persons and yet remain one, and only one, God. So the first reason we develop words that

are not present in the scriptures is to help us better articulate what God has revealed about our faith in and through them. In fact, in the early church, theology was primarily a practice of developing a deeper understanding of the Christian life through the interpretation of the biblical writings alone.

There is a second reason that words such as *theology* emerged into common usage, even though they are not used by the biblical writers. Theology is sometimes referred to as “second-order discourse,” in contrast to “first-order discourse,” which encompasses the primary expressions of our faith such as worship, prayer, acts of mercy, and even the reading of scripture. We human beings act and express our faith in a variety of ways, after which we reflect intellectually upon our Christian practices. We want to discern if we are practicing the faith in accordance with the scriptural witnesses and if our expressions are consistent in the message or the witness they offer to others, and we wish to respond to challenges that arise. The practice of theological reflection, then, comes after or in response to our “first-order” faith practices, which thus renders the reflective engagement “second-order discourse.”

Where did this model of reflecting upon our practices arise? It is exactly the kind of reflection we see Jesus of Nazareth practicing throughout the Gospels. For example, when Jesus heals the bent-over woman, the authorities challenge his decision to heal on the Sabbath. His practice is deemed inappropriate, according to the religious sensibilities of first-century Judaism. But Jesus, like any good theologian, answers their condemnation with questions: “Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?” (Luke 13:15-16). Thus, when we question why the word *theology* does not appear in the Bible, we can conclude that the practice of theological reflection was modeled

for us by Jesus, Paul, and others. Theological reflection serves as a way to deepen our faith and to enable us to assess our faithfulness to the scriptural witnesses. Of course, being faithful to the scriptural witnesses is more complicated than we often admit or recognize, which is a point to which we will return in the third chapter, as we discuss the sources for doing theology.

Hopefully, you feel persuaded that a word need not be present in the Bible to be a valid Christian concept, as is the case with the word *theology*. But we also must consider the ambiguity of the word and its varied meanings over the centuries and even in contemporary usage. As we noted, today there are two primary ways we use the word *theology*. First, it represents the larger discipline of study, encompassing all that relates to God and the Christian faith. For example, we speak of schools of theology and all the studies contained within. This overarching meaning is the general usage of the term. But the second use of *theology* is to represent the specific discipline of “systematic theology,” a narrower area of study that examines the doctrines (i.e., teachings) of the Christian faith in their coherence, consistency, and appropriateness. A third meaning of *theology* is yet more precisely the doctrine of God proper, or the study of God’s nature and being, and is contained within the discipline of systematic theology. In the following section, we turn to a brief exploration of how theology entered into our language and became a central practice of the Christian faith.²

■ THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE WORD *THEOLOGY*

As we noted above, *theology* is not a biblical word, though it is a practice present within the scriptures and throughout Christian history. A good example is found in chapter 3 of the Gospel of John, where Jesus encourages Nicodemus, through a series of questions,

2 Throughout the following section, I rely upon the work of Yves Congar, *A History of Theology*, trans. and ed. Hunter Guthrie (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1968).

to reflect on the meaning of faith. Paul's letters are considered to represent the first theological reflection upon the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth (remember, of course, that—even though they refer to an earlier time—the Gospels were written down later than Paul's letters). In a very real sense, Paul is the first Christian theologian, deliberately reflecting upon the teachings of Jesus and the practices of early Christians. Even so, he did not use the word *theology* itself.

In fact, in the early church, up until the twelfth century, the word *theology* was seldom used by Christian writers. This was due to, at least in part, its meaning within the pagan Greek world, where it referred, first, to mythologies and, later, in the Stoics and beyond, to a systematic reflection on the divine (i.e., the gods) with an emphasis upon analyzing the divine presence in the world, rather than considering the nature of the gods. During the Patristic period,³ the early Christian theologians were reluctant to use the Greek term, given its associations with pagan and philosophical thought. Origen (185–253 CE) is widely held to have written the first systematic theology of sorts, *On First Principles*, which examines the truth of the scriptures and how those truths connect and relate to one another, but he does not consider himself a theologian undertaking the practice of theology. It is important to recognize that the earliest Christian writers were doing theology, even as the word was not yet common usage for this practice of reflecting upon and providing a reasoned, coherent account of the one true God. Edward Farley, a twentieth-century theologian, explains that the earliest Christian theological engagement was “a salvifically oriented knowledge of divine being [that] was part of the Christian community and tradition long before it was named theology.”⁴ In other words, the early Christians were reflecting upon the

3 In chapter 2, we examine the periods of theological activity. The Patristic Era is generally considered to begin in the year 100 CE and continue through 425 CE.

4 Edward Farley, *Theologia* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), 33.

scriptures and articulating a thoughtful understanding of God and the life of faith in Christ for the sake of salvation.

Because theology was centrally concerned with the biblical witnesses from the beginning of the Christian faith, these early church writers developed ways of drawing out and presenting the meaning of the scriptures. As is true in every generation, there was not unanimity in how the scriptures should be interpreted. There were two competing schools in the Patristic Era: the Alexandrian School and the Antiochene School, and variations within each school. The Alexandrian School grew out of the interpretive methods of Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE–40 CE), who utilized an allegorical method for interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures. In utilizing this method, Philo sought to discern a hidden, deeper, spiritual meaning thought to be present in every scriptural text. With the rise of Christian interpreters located in Greek Alexandria, Philo's method was appropriated by writers such as Origen, who sought to uncover the literal, moral, and spiritual or allegorical sense of each scriptural passage as a basis for reflecting upon God and the Christian life. In the Western or Latin church, the allegorical method was practiced by Augustine of Hippo, who condensed the levels of meaning into a twofold pattern of the literal/bodily/historical sense and an allegorical/spiritual/theological one. Simply put, these writers understood that there is more to the scriptural texts than meets the eye, given the spiritual nature of God and the life of faith.

Perhaps it comes as no surprise to discover that this practice of seeking the deeper or underlying spiritual meaning of biblical texts was disputed and criticized. It led to charges of *eisogesis*, a practice of reading into the text rather than drawing out the meaning therein (i.e., *exegesis*). The Antiochene School countered the Alexandrian method of discerning the spiritual meaning of texts by emphasizing the historical and grammatical interpretation of scripture, in order to bring out the “plain” meaning. These interpreters sought to understand the

author's meaning (we might call this the original intent) and to read the language directly rather than allegorically. In other words, Christian writers in the Antiochene School of interpretation, such as John Chrysostom (347–407 CE), held the belief that each text had one literal meaning, which was true for all persons in all ages. Alister McGrath helps us to see the distinction between and implications of these schools in suggesting that the Antiochene School “tended to interpret relatively few Old Testament passages as referring directly to Christ, whereas the Alexandrian School regarded Christ as the hidden content of many Old Testament passages.”⁵ Moreover, we can see that this debate about how to interpret the scriptures continues into our own time, with some persons adhering to a strict, unwavering meaning of each text and others allowing for a wider interpretation of the Bible.

In other words, today we continue the practice of interpretation, known as *hermeneutics*, and we continue to debate exactly how the scriptures should be read and interpreted, especially for the sake of our theological reflection on God and the Christian faith. At this point, you might wish to pause and consider how you tend to read the Bible. Do you seek to discover the one literal meaning of any passage? Do you focus on the historical realities of the text? Or do you tend to read with an eye on the spiritual meaning, especially for your own life? Perhaps your reading of the scriptures entails some combination of the levels of interpretation. It is important for us to remember that from the earliest days of the church, theology drew heavily upon the biblical witnesses, but the techniques or methods for reading those texts varied among theologians, all of whom were seeking to be faithful to God. Moreover, the question of how to read the scriptures is present in every era of theological activity down to the present day, without ever arriving at a consensus on how the scriptures ought to be read

5 Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 130.

and interpreted. Of course, a careful reader will recognize that this ongoing openness reflects the mystery of the living God whom we must seek with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, but can never fully grasp and articulate. Sometimes our interpretation will be deeply meaningful and genuinely reflective of the reality of God; other times we will fall sadly short in our interpretation as a result of our human finitude. Yet we are compelled to continue this journey of seeking to know the living God and how best to live out the scriptural claims about who God is and what we are called to be and do. In the third chapter, we delve more deeply into the importance of scripture as a primary source for doing theology, but for now, let's return to our consideration of how theology came into common usage and practice.

From the sixth through the twelfth centuries, during the Middle Ages or Medieval Era, religious orders such as the Franciscans and Dominicans were formed, and each order articulated a theological perspective. Noted theologians were associated with these religious orders, such as Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican monk, and William of Ockham, who belonged to the Franciscans. The practice of theology continued along the trajectory begun in the Patristic Era and focused on developing a comprehensive account of the meaning and the content of the biblical witnesses (i.e., knowledge received by revelation) while also engaging philosophical tools or principles (i.e., knowledge discovered through the use of reason). The use of reason to articulate Christian doctrine will rise to the level of a science, *sacred science*, during this era.

Although these Christians are doing theology, they have yet to name it as such, but keep in mind that, in many ways, their pursuit of theology was intertwined with and inseparable from their spirituality. Theology was then and continues to be an embodied practice of the whole person, rather than simply a mental exercise. Theology should shape our spirituality and vice versa. We should enter into theological reflection with an attitude of prayer and humility. Despite their

spiritual concerns, the most noted theologians of this period, writing in the twelfth century, were charged with lapsing into mental gymnastics, dealing with minutia considered less central to the church and salvation. Notably, these theologians have been accused of debating the question, “How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?” Most scholars today believe this question was not a subject of debate but was suggested by others to illuminate and discredit the medieval tendency to consider insignificant matters *ad infinitum*.

Toward the end of this period of theological activity, universities began to arise, and theology entered the university setting as a particular discipline of study, based in the scriptures and philosophical reasoning, and generally referred to as *sacra doctrina* or sacred teaching. We refer to this period of theological development in the twelfth century as *scholasticism*, and Thomas Aquinas is the exemplar of scholastic theology. Scholastic theology was philosophical, speculative, rational, dialectical, and questioning. It sought to systematize the knowledge of God. It became, as Congar suggests, “God’s *science*, that is to say, the order according to which God, in His wisdom, links all things together.”⁶ The theologian’s task, then, was to articulate this sacred science of God as a human endeavor aimed at providing a compendium of divine knowledge. In this era, quite unlike today, the sciences were considered to be “the handmaid of theology,” because any knowledge of the world and its principles was thought to provide insights into the nature of God and God’s mission or work in the world; all things point to God and originate in God. For this reason, within the early universities of Europe, theology became the queen of the sciences, possessing the heights and depths of knowledge. Strange as it may seem today, universities once considered theology as the subject that unified and undergirded all other academic disciplines.

It is in the twelfth century that the word *theology* began to emerge

6 Congar, *A History of Theology*, 95.

in the senses with which we are familiar today. *Theology* was now used to refer to the study of God and to the discipline that engages in this scientific pursuit. The first actual use of the word is generally attributed to Peter Abelard (1079–1142), a French scholastic philosopher and theologian whose works were written in Latin, the scholarly language of the medieval world. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides us with the etymology of *theology* within the English language:

Abelard applied the term to a philosophical treatment of the doctrines of the Christian religion, which, though at first strongly condemned, became current, and, in this sense, “theologia” came to designate a department of academic study, the text-books of which were the Bible and the Sentences (from the Fathers) of Peter Lombard. Hence the earliest English use.⁷

We have now arrived at the point, historically, where the word *theology* enters into usage in the English language. Yet, even at the outset, it conveyed multiple meanings. Not only did it mean the study of the doctrine of God proper, but it also came to represent the field or discipline of theology located within the university setting and existing to provide a reasoned account of the teachings of the Christian faith.

In the wake of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, the onset of modernity, and the rise of the modern university, theology ceased to be the queen of the sciences. Indeed, with the advent of modern scientific methods and the decline of traditional authorities, including the church, theology could no longer claim any place among the sciences. As the university sought to free itself from the shackles of authorities, including or especially religious authorities, in order to pursue scientific truth via reason and replicable methods, theology was viewed with suspicion. This placed the study of theology on

⁷ Oxford English Dictionary Online, June 2014, s. v. “theology.” <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/200388?redirectedFrom=theology> (accessed January 31, 2017).

a trajectory in which the discipline has grown to be less commonly represented in contemporary universities and sometimes subject to criticism when faith is viewed as standing in opposition to science. Yet, at the same time, scholars also came to understand that modern scientific and historical methods could be applied to the study of the Bible, which aided the task of theological study.

During the nineteenth century, the discipline of theology began to fragment or divide into sub-disciplines and specialties. Theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) offered a proposal in *A Brief Outline of the Study of Theology* (1811), which argued for the division of theology into three separate areas: philosophical, historical, and practical theology. Although Schleiermacher's threefold curriculum was never widely implemented, following his initial proposal, the study of theology has come to include a variety of disciplines, including Bible, church history, theology and ethics, and the practices of ministry. Thus, since the nineteenth century, *theology* has come to mean a variety of disciplines generally related to the preparation for vocational, pastoral ministry. This is the broader meaning of *theology*.

Within the academic study of theology in this broader sense, there is a particular sub-discipline or specialty in theology, most commonly named "systematic" theology or, less frequently today, "dogmatic" theology, or sometimes, "constructive" theology. This is the narrower meaning of *theology* in today's usage. Systematic theology provides a framework for thinking about the different facets of our Christian faith, including God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the church, the human being, and eschatology, among other doctrines. Systematic theology also considers questions of the sources, methods, and context for doing theology, which we refer to as *prolegomena* (the things said before or first). These are the tools and considerations that theologians have engaged since the earliest days of the church, even as they have been debated and reformulated through the ages.

Finally, there is also a discipline within theological studies known

as “practical” theology. Every minister, ultimately, is a practical theologian. Practical theology draws on the doctrines, the teachings, of systematic theology, as well as sound biblical and historical understanding, to attend to the practices of the Christian faith in a coherent, meaningful, consistent, and careful manner. The authors of *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* define practical theology as “a *theoretical* enquiry, in so far as it seeks to understand practice, to evaluate, to criticize; to look at the relationship between what is done and what is said or professed. At the same time it is also a deeply *practical* discipline.”⁸ Although there is an academic discipline that is referred to as “practical theology,” every pastor is a practical theologian. Every pastor should draw upon careful theological insights and scriptural grounds for preaching, worship planning, teaching, pastoral care, evangelism, missional outreach, leadership, and other pastoral practices. Without a deep knowledge of theology, your practice of ministry will fall short of the mark, which is faithfulness to God in Jesus Christ.

In sum, this study of the basics of systematic theology provides an introduction to one of the most important tools for ministry. The pages that follow explore prolegomena and doctrines, emphasizing United Methodist doctrinal standards and theology, and with an eye to how our theological reflection can guide, deepen, and develop our ministry practice. With this overview in place, we turn to chapter 2, which offers a brief survey of the eras of theological activity in order to gain some sense of how theological understanding and the church’s doctrines have emerged over time.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION —————

1. Review the first section, which explores the statement, “It is God’s will.” Have you ever used this phrase? In what context? Looking

8 John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 11, italics original.

back with new understanding, how might you question and re-think your use of the phrase? Can you raise questions about a similar phrase, “God is in control,” that might make you think twice about using it in your ministry?

2. How do you react to the knowledge that not all theological words are found in the Bible? Do you think there are good reasons for us to use terms such as *Trinity* and *theology*?
3. Can you think of historical circumstances where the Bible has been used to justify personal or social positions that, over time, have proven to be contrary to the gospel message? What about the Bible’s use in supporting the institution of slavery for generations?

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

Congar, Yves. *A History of Theology*. Translated and edited by Hunter Guthrie. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1968.

Farley, Edward. *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001. Previously published by Augsburg Fortress, 1994.

HOW DID **THEOLOGY** DEVELOP?

John Wesley considered sound theological understanding to be an important skill for his lay preachers. Each of his early conferences of preachers spent considerable time ensuring everyone shared a common set of theological doctrines. For example, in the first annual conference on Monday, June 24, 1744, they considered the question, “What is it to be justified?” The answer given indicated, “To be pardoned and received into God’s favour and into such state that, if we continue therein, we shall be finally saved.”¹ This represents one of Wesley’s core doctrinal teachings: salvation is a day-by-day process of relying on God’s grace; we are not “once saved, always saved.” Moreover, John Wesley’s sermons—which United Methodists now hold as doctrinal standards—provided good doctrinal, theological guidance for his preachers, and were modeled on the homilies of Thomas Cranmer used in Wesley’s Church of England to provide for doctrinal standards. In other words, Wesley studied and drew upon the long history of Christian theological development, but also established basic standards for Methodist belief. His theology did not arise out of a vacuum.

¹ From “Doctrines and Discipline in the Minutes of the Conferences, 1744–1747,” The First Annual Conference, in *John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 136–37.

Salvation is a day-by-day
process of relying on
God's grace.

Sometimes students taking their first course in systematic theology will stumble upon an idea that they think is brilliant and original. Of course, the fact that one person has never considered a particular idea does not mean that no one has ever written about it in the course of human history. A tremendous wealth of theological reflection has happened through the centuries and often is at the base of our embedded theology, even though we lack familiarity with those in the past who have shaped and sharpened the beliefs we now hold and need to examine carefully and deliberatively. To engage in the practice of deliberative theology, we need to have a basic awareness of how theological positions and doctrines have emerged.

In this section, we turn to a brief overview of the eras of theological activity and theological movements that have shaped Christian belief and practice. We want to understand, in broad brushstrokes, how our thinking and teaching about God, our theological reflection, has developed over the course of Christian history and what questions have been of central concern. As you might imagine, a comprehensive treatment of the history of theological activity is well beyond the scope of this introductory volume, and we will only be able to sketch the basic contours of the development of theological thought, thus neglecting many significant developments. Our intent is not for you to understand the sweep of theological developments in great detail; but rather, to learn how to read theologians in order to grasp their context and their major theological concerns or questions. John Wesley was a product of his time, and to understand his theology, we should also know where he fits in the long stream of Christian teachings. What

were the primary or driving concerns, broadly conceived, that theologians have taken up in each period and why? You should read this chapter with an eye for the big picture, and consider where Wesley and Methodist doctrine fit into the larger account.

■ THEOLOGY, DOCTRINE, AND DOGMA

Before we turn to the main questions raised in each era of theological inquiry, two related concerns need to be addressed that will clear a path forward. First, we need to distinguish among the terms *theology*, *doctrine*, and *dogma*. Second, it will be helpful to understand the underlying motivations for why Christians have constructed and reconstructed Christian doctrine down through the ages.

We have already defined *theology* as the study of God and the things of faith. Theology is an intellectual reflection upon the content of the Christian faith so that we might live out that faith in alignment with the scriptural witnesses, particularly those that bear witness to the way of Jesus Christ, who is the center of our faith. Theology, as this reasoned and responsible God-talk, is properly a task of the church. It is undertaken in order to strengthen and illuminate the life of faith. But it is crucial to grasp that theology is done by individuals on behalf of the larger church, and because theological reflection and writing is done by individuals, it may or may not rise to normative status within the church or a particular denomination. We will find many good examples of this distinction in the early church where questions about Jesus Christ, sin, worship, and other matters were debated by different theologians. Any one person's theological writings or position can be accepted or rejected by a community of faith. When rejected, that position does not disappear; it remains as a theological argument even though it falls short of providing guidance or a standard for the church's belief and practice. The key to keep in mind is that theology is an individual practice by those who

wish to illuminate the life of faith or challenge prevailing perspectives and practices.

An individual theologian's reflection and articulation of Christian beliefs and practices can become part of the church's or a denomination's standard teachings through communal processes that affirm the meaningfulness and fittingness of that position. In the early church, ecumenical councils were the source of this affirmation. In today's Protestant denominations, various communal processes known as *polity* lead to or have in the past led to the acceptance of particular ways of understanding the Christian faith. These communally affirmed teachings are known as *dogma* or, more commonly today, *doctrine*. The distinction between these two words is a bit ambiguous, but let's try to clarify the difference in contemporary usage.

The English word *dogma* comes from the Latin word meaning "principle" or "tenet," and through much of theological history, it referred to the authoritative teachings of the church. It is still used in the Catholic tradition to refer to beliefs and practices that have been confirmed as revealed by God and applicable to the faithful. Sometimes, the word *dogma* is used to connote a certain rigidity or inflexibility of thought, but in theological terms it means something more akin to "authoritative." Generally speaking, the affirmation of theological positions as church dogma occurs through a hierarchical process in which those at the higher levels of authority—such as the Pope—have a greater capacity to determine correct dogma than those lower in the hierarchy. In this sense, the theology of some individuals can take on normative status as church dogma through a hierarchical process of affirmation.

Most Protestants today, however, speak of church *doctrine*, which is a word we have already used repeatedly in this introductory volume. Our English word *doctrine* comes originally from the Latin, meaning "teaching" or sometimes "learning," and refers to the teachings of the church that have been communally authorized. Jaroslav Pelikan

defines it this way: "What the church of Jesus Christ believes, teaches, and confesses on the basis of the word of God: this is Christian doctrine."² For Protestant denominations today, the acceptance or affirmation of theology as sound doctrine tends to occur within democratic processes in which a larger body participates in determining the validity of doctrines. In the case of United Methodists, the General Conference fixed and continually upholds our doctrines.

At the same time, we should recognize that the theological writings of the "founders" of different denominations are usually accorded a normative status for that community of believers. Here, Wesley's sermons, his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, the Articles of Religion Wesley abridged from the Church of England, and his "General Rules" compose our doctrinal standards along with the Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church. The "founding" doctrines of various denominations could be altered by the larger community, but seldom, if ever, does this occur in practice, since the founders are considered to be authoritative in shaping the identity of the denomination. Thus, the writings of Calvin for Presbyterians and others in the Reformed Tradition, those of Luther for the Lutherans, and Wesley's writings for Methodists have become doctrinal standards or normative for belief and practice within that community of believers. At the same time, if they were alive today, Calvin, Luther, and Wesley might think the way we articulate and live out their teachings bears little resemblance to what they taught. We should note as well that in some non-denominational churches the accepted doctrine or set of teachings may arise from a single person who leads the church, thereby conflating the individual's theology and the community's doctrine without a formalized process to affirm these teachings.

2 Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1: *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 1.

As a United Methodist, do you have a clear sense of the doctrinal standards that your denomination teaches and upholds? Do you know where to find those standards for belief and practice? You may also wish to consider why it is important and common practice to maintain doctrinal standards. While there are different ways to answer this question, we can point to two primary considerations. First, doctrines form the basis of identity for any given community. They help us to know who we are as a community of believers, and, at the same time, they help to distinguish our church from other churches or denominations. Second, for most churches and denominations, these doctrines are not abstract pronouncements, but rather, they say something important about our lived expression of the gospel. Doctrines indicate how we understand our calling to be disciples of Jesus Christ and to bear witness to our faith in the world. In other words, doctrines are much more than a set of beliefs to which we assent, they are the very core of our practice and embodiment of the Christian faith in specific times and places.

Many years ago I received a call from a United Methodist clergy colleague who lived in another state. He wanted some advice because he found himself in the midst of a raging controversy in his congregation. As he explained, he had been preaching a sermon series on “Who is Jesus Christ?” and in the third and final sermon, he proclaimed from the pulpit about the humanity of Jesus. But in doing so, he stated that he believed Jesus was only a man and not divine. Following the service, many members of the congregation were upset with the pastor and even threatened to bring charges against him to the district superintendent. The colleague wanted me to affirm his sermon and denounce the narrowmindedness of his congregation. Instead, I suggested that this clergy colleague had preached his own theology rather than the communally validated doctrines of the denomination. When he was ordained in a denomination with a clear set of teachings that include the fully human and fully divine nature

of Jesus Christ, this clergyperson had agreed to uphold and teach the community's beliefs and practices. When, instead, he offered up his own theology from the pulpit, church members were rightly upset.

The point here is that it is perfectly acceptable for a clergyperson or any church member to question and hold different theological positions, but when we represent the larger denomination or church-community, we agree to teach and preach the doctrines that constitute our identity as Christians in the United Methodist tradition. When we are in the pulpit, we are not simply representing our own theology, which may be good theology or not so good theology; we are representing a long tradition of believers who have together discerned what we will teach, preach, and practice. Of course, sometimes a prophetic word must be proclaimed to break open systems and practices, even doctrines, which have turned away from God and toward human desires and brokenness. But prophetic practice, like any other theological activity, requires careful deliberation to avoid the pitfall of offering our own theology as God's word to the community.

■ MOTIVATIONS FOR DOING THEOLOGY

With this sense of the difference between theology and doctrine, and in particular, the communally authorized nature of doctrine, we are now in a better position to consider the eras of theological activity and the theological movements that have shaped our contemporary understanding of the Christian faith. The practice of theology has enabled the continuous process of doctrinal development since the first Christians began to gather together. But why? Why did early Christians feel it necessary to reflect upon their beliefs and practices? What was the motivation or impetus that spurred this process? Apart from the basic human drive to understand our existence, in his book *The Making of Christian Doctrine*, Maurice Wiles posits that three primary motivations existed among the first theologians: 1) apologetics,

2) heresy, and 3) clarification of the faith. Each of these has a particular concern or focal point that may or may not be particularly relevant in our contemporary setting.

By definition, *apologetics* means a defense of the faith against external opposition. The first Christians found themselves challenged to explain and defend their beliefs and practices to Jews and Greeks alike. Particularly pressing was the need to explain the one God who became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth and sent the Holy Spirit to be with believers. For strictly monotheistic Jews, this sounded like three gods. For polytheistic Greeks who had a panoply of gods for everything under the sun, including the sun (Helios), it made no sense to limit the gods to only three. Thus, early Christians began to articulate the doctrine of the Trinity, one God in three persons, which was affirmed by the Council of Nicaea in 325, thus granting it normative doctrinal status. Nevertheless, questions and criticism from non-Christians helped to move the early church to defend and thereby delineate this important doctrine. Today, there are theologians who continue to engage in apologetics, particularly seeking to explain and defend the faith in light of an increasingly secular and non-religious or post-Christian society.

A second motivation for doctrinal development involved questions of *heresy*, or the internal correction of false belief (in contrast to *orthodoxy*, which is, by definition, right belief or that which has been affirmed and authorized by the church). *Heresy* is not a word we often hear today in the Protestant context, largely because basic doctrines have been settled and denominationalism—not to mention non-denominationalism—allows for varied interpretations of the basic doctrines. But there is an additional consideration related to the notion of heresy: sometimes orthodoxy, or what is thought to be good doctrine, may prove over time and by means of careful reflection to be inconsistent with the way of God and the scriptural witnesses. Sometimes prophetic voices are ultimately proven to be not heretics but correctors of established beliefs, as is often demonstrated in the

major and minor prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures, as well as by the witnesses to the prophet we know as Jesus of Nazareth.

Even so, in the early church, as doctrines were being articulated for the first time, debates arose that led to the determination of false belief. For example, Arius argued that Jesus Christ was not divine, but only the first or greatest among all creatures. This position was deemed heretical, as the fully divine nature of Christ was affirmed at the Council of Nicaea. Another example is the controversy in defining sin and grace, in which Pelagius argued that human beings can choose not to sin and do so unaided by grace. Augustine's articulation of the bondage of the will or our inability not to sin (in Latin, *non posse non peccare*) ultimately prevailed in favor of our utter reliance upon the grace of God. Despite this sense of "winners" and "losers" in the theological debates of the early church, we should keep in mind that those deemed heretics played a crucial role in helping the church think through what it believes and how it practices the faith. As Wiles emphasizes, "The influence of heresy on the early development of doctrine is so great that it is almost impossible to exaggerate it."³

The third motivation offered by Wiles is that of internal clarification of the faith among the believers. In every age, including our own, there are people who question and seek to understand Christian faith and teachings more deeply. These questioners lead us to reflect upon and clarify our teachings and practices. In the early church, of course, there were questions arising about every aspect of the faith, as churches formed and people attempted to make sense of the Christian beliefs and practices, especially considering the scriptural witnesses. A good contemporary example of this motivation for doctrinal development is found in the theology that arose following World War II and the horrors of the holocaust. Christians found it impossible

3 Maurice Wiles, *The Making of Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 36.

to ignore the question of where God was and how such evils could be perpetrated. These questions led theologians into a deeper consideration of the problem of evil, theodicy, in light of the nature of God and human free will. But we should be clear that this relatively recent theological reflection upon theodicy has not necessarily been affirmed by communal processes to rise to the level of doctrinal standard. Nonetheless, clarification of our Christian beliefs is an ongoing necessity because faith is a journey and never a destination. Every age must understand Jesus Christ anew, in its own time and place in human and salvation history.

Although apologetics, heresy, and internal clarification stand out as three primary motivations for doctrinal development, we can name additional reasons that might be closely related to these three. As noted earlier in this chapter, the impulse to interpret scripture for the sake of Christian belief and practice has always been a primary one; thus the importance of drawing out the meaning of the Bible can be seen as a hermeneutical or interpretive motivation. There is also the fact that our first-order discourse, the practices of the faith, especially in the early church, led to theological reflection and doctrinal development. For instance, the Eucharist or Holy Communion drew great criticism and charges of cannibalism in the early church, which believers were compelled to address in upholding that the bread is the body of Jesus and the wine is his blood. Pelikan also prevails upon us to grasp that, despite its central message of salvation, the early church had yet to discern the meaning and mechanism of salvation in Christ, thereby making the articulation of a doctrine of salvation or soteriology a primary focus in the first centuries following Christ's death and resurrection. Maybe you can think of additional reasons for the ongoing development of doctrine as a necessary and helpful practice of the church.

All of these doctrinal considerations continue to be discussed and developed down through the history of the Christian faith, and, while many denominations adhere to certain doctrinal standards, we should

never view the process of reflecting upon and refining our teachings as closed and finished. While God is perfect, we human beings are always prone to errors in judgment, reasoning, and interpretation. While God is omniscient, we human beings are always learning. As we turn next to a brief overview of the eras of theological activity and theological movements, we can note that certain teachings or particular questions predominate in different eras. For example, the rise of liberation theologies in the late 1960s and beyond led to an expanded understanding of the doctrine of sin (sometimes called *hamartiology* from the Greek word *hamartia*, “to miss the mark”).

Liberation theologians have expanded our concept of sin by demonstrating, not only its personal and individual form, but also the way sin is expressed in systems and institutions. The language we use for the latter is “systemic sin.” This development has deepened our understanding of the presence of sin in the world in significant ways, especially given our increasingly global and interconnected existence. We will have more to say about systemic sin in chapter 4. For now, as we proceed into the eras of theological activity, keep an eye turned to the broader brushstrokes of theology that arise in each period.

■ PERIODS OF THEOLOGICAL ACTIVITY

We now begin our consideration of some of the major questions and prominent theologians that have developed the church’s teachings down through the centuries. If we think of theology as a stream flowing toward the ocean that is the fullness of God, each human life enters this stream at a distinct point in time and within a particular lived context. When we see the movement of the stream over the centuries, we are better able to chart our own theological position or where we stand in this long stream of belief. It may also help us to assess how Methodist beliefs relate to and depart from various theological positions. The periods of theological activity that we will address in

a general fashion include: the Patristic Era (c.100–425 or, some suggest, 100–600), the Medieval Era or Middle Ages (c.700–1300), the Reformation Era (c.1500–1750), the Modern Era (1750–c.2000), and the so-called Postmodern Era in which we currently find ourselves. As you read about them, try to grasp the major points, themes, or questions that shaped each era, as well as the context in which theological reflection took place. It should also be noted that the following overview relies upon the magisterial work of Jaroslav Pelikan, whose five-volume *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* remains, perhaps, the most thorough treatment available of the church's doctrinal development.

THE PATRISTIC ERA

The Patristic Era begins with the closing of the New Testament canon and continues through the Council of Nicaea in 451, though historians sometimes place the close of this era at the end of the seventh century. It is widely recognized as the period of theological activity that established some of the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith: the two natures of Jesus Christ, the Trinity, grace and sin, as well as notions about the nature of the church. In some important ways, United Methodist beliefs begin here, as John Wesley had a deep regard for the teachings of the early church. These early Christian writers, especially Augustine, will serve as the basis for theological activity down through the ages, whether as a source of affirmation of the church's teachings or a point of critique. Nonetheless, the Patristic Era is the point of origin for the authority of what we know as "tradition," which is an important source for doing theology, as we will see in the next chapter. Remember that the tradition or communal affirmations enable the theology of individuals to become church doctrine. Another way to speak of this traditioning process is to consider the establishment of orthodoxy (literally, right teaching). In other words, the

church begins a process of affirming what is known, believed, taught, and confessed about Jesus Christ as the center or head or heart of the community of believers.

Several key doctrines are delineated during these early centuries, including the Trinity, the two natures of Jesus Christ, the holiness of the church, the nature of grace, the meaning of salvation, and the interpretation of scripture. While each of these doctrines could be the subject of a chapter or even a book, at this point we will only sketch the basic contours of the discussions that unfolded. Our main concern is to recognize that, first, early theologians offered different understandings of the faith that were debated and settled but never without ongoing critique and reexamination; and second, that these basic considerations will be built upon in subsequent theological eras. Most significant for doctrinal development will be the writings of Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, though Irenaeus, Tertullian, and even the “heretics” whose positions were defeated will play a prominent role in clarifying and explaining what Christians believe.

One of the primary concerns of the early Christians, in light of the Jewish context from which Christian faith arose, was to articulate the importance of Jesus Christ and his relation to God. Judaism, of course, was expecting the Messiah, a brilliant political-military leader like King David who would restore the greatness of Israel. But this Messiah, Jesus Christ, brought new teachings, suffered and died on the cross, and rose again on the third day. Remember that there were external challenges requiring apologetics, challenges from those whose teachings would be deemed heretical or false, and internal discussions aimed at clarification of the faith. All of these converge in one primary question: Who is Jesus Christ? As a result, two central doctrines of the faith were established: The doctrine of the Trinity (one God in three persons) and the two natures of Jesus Christ (fully human and fully divine). We will consider these doctrines more closely in chapter 4. Key theologians who set the terms for these doctrinal statements included

Tertullian, the Cappadocians, and Athanasius; and these teachings were confirmed by the councils of Nicaea (325) and Chalcedon (451).

The second area of doctrinal development is what we refer to as *ecclesiology* or the doctrine of the church. The church was a new entity and, therefore, as yet undefined. One of the early questions involved the holiness of the church, by which we mean that which makes it a community of restored and reconciled, though sinful, human beings. Baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was the entryway into the church's holiness, but in the midst of the persecution of the early church under Emperor Diocletian (c.303–305), a number of priests renounced Christianity and gave over sacred Christian texts to be burned. The question then asked about these *traditores*, or those who handed over the faith (in contrast to those who faithfully hand it down), was whether the sacraments they had previously performed were valid, given that the one who had administered the rite had fallen away from the faith. The Donatists—a schismatic sect of Christians—argued for the rebaptism of those believers who had been baptized by *traditores*, in order to retain the purity of the church. The controversy continued throughout the fourth and into the fifth centuries. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, responded most memorably to this challenge and concluded that the holiness of the church is never dependent upon the holiness or worthiness of the people, even the clergy. The office that represents God's grace, not the person, is where the holiness or authority is located. In other words, the validity of baptism lies in the action and holiness of God and only God. People are, to use a later phrase, the means of grace and not the grace itself. The phrase to represent this understanding of the church's sacraments and their efficacy is *ex opere operato* ("on account of the work which is done"), thereby suggesting the efficacy depends strictly upon the action of Christ in and through the sacrament. This position framed by Augustine has remained a basic tenet of the church's doctrine across the ages and still today. Augustine

also argued that the schism of the Donatists was a graver error than the lapses of the persecuted.

Saint Augustine also is credited with providing an initial understanding of sin and grace in his refutation of Pelagianism, which argued that human beings can choose not to sin. Augustine responded to this claim by arguing that we are not able not to sin (*non posse non peccare*) by means of our own will. As a result of this theological debate, doctrines related to original sin, the bondage of the will, the necessity of grace (and insufficiency of the law), as well as the importance of infant baptism took shape. In many respects, the way Augustine framed the concepts of sin and grace continues to provide the basis for our understanding of these aspects of theological anthropology, ecclesiology, and the doctrine of God. More will be said about the human condition as sinful but graced in chapter 4. Augustine's theology of grace became normative for Catholicism and within a number of Protestant traditions, though the question of infant baptism remains disputed among Protestants.

Let's read a brief extract from Augustine's treatise on "The Spirit and the Letter," which responds to Pelagius. Augustine writes:

It is not our purpose in this work to expound the Epistle to the Romans, but to use its testimony to prove as surely as we may that the divine aid for the working of righteousness consists not in God's gift of the law, full as it is of good and holy commands, but in that our will itself, without which we cannot do the good, is aided and uplifted by the imparting of the Spirit of grace. Without that aid, the teaching is a letter that killeth.⁴

You have just completed your first "close reading" of a primary theological text or, at least, a sliver of a text. In a close reading, we cannot

⁴ *Augustine: Later Works*, selected, trans. John Burnaby (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), 209.

skim the text because it is so rich with meaning and intricate in its logic. It requires us to slow down and savor the writing. In fact, you might wish to read the excerpt a second time before continuing. There are several things to note in our study of this brief excerpt. First, Augustine indicates that he is basing his theological case for the necessity of grace on the scriptures and, in particular, Paul's letter to the Romans. Here we see that he is telling us something about his sources or upon what grounds he makes his claim. Second, we read that both the law and grace are gifts of God, but that they must work in tandem, for without grace—which he equates with the Spirit—we cannot do what the law requires. Finally, notice that the title of the treatise, "The Spirit and the Letter," is reflected clearly in this passage as Augustine demonstrates the way that the Spirit of grace and the letter of the law operate in conjunction with the human will. Of course, if we read the entire treatise, the development of Augustine's full argument and logic would become clear. But this excerpt enables us to begin the process of reading theology as a spiritual practice, and when we read primary texts—those original writings of theologians—they may be difficult to understand and our reading slow and uncertain, but the depth of the wisdom contained within will often surprise us, move us, and open us to new ways of encountering the living God.

Two other doctrinal affirmations were articulated during the Patristic period, though they would face ongoing discussion and reconstruction throughout the centuries to follow: 1) scriptural interpretation and its authority for the life of faith, and 2) the meaning of salvation in Christ. In the previous chapter we addressed the two schools of thought related to scriptural interpretation, and this question of hermeneutics will be debated in all eras of theological activity. Clearly, the early church recognized the centrality of the scriptural witnesses as the primary source for theological and doctrinal affirmation. The problem, of course, has always been that texts can and have been read in various ways, suggesting a need for the church to also

provide some standards for the validity of interpretations. Thus begins a question of the primacy of scripture or tradition in the development of doctrines, which will come to a head during the Reformation.

The final development that deserves our attention in this brief overview is the meaning of salvation or what we refer to as *soteriology*. Undoubtedly, the development of the church's understanding of Jesus Christ necessarily led to clarification of the meaning of salvation in Christ, with an emphasis on the establishment of a new creation and not simply the restoration of what was presumably lost in the fall. In many ways, soteriology (sometimes referred to as the work of Christ in contrast to the person of Christ or Christology) is the very heart of the Christian faith. It is in and through this Jesus who is the Christ and is himself God that human beings find the hope of life in its fullness, even life eternal. Of course, Christians will continue to explore the meaning of salvation throughout the centuries. Indeed, as McGrath notes, virtually all the streams of Christian theology since the Patristic Era have been concerned with "continuing, extending, and, where necessary, criticizing the views of the early church writers."⁵ Consequently, the reflections of these first theologians have become official teachings of the church (i.e., doctrines) and normative for the church's belief and practice, even as they are continually refined and reformed. And with the affirmation of orthodoxy, the notion of tradition as a primary source for later theological reflection and doctrinal discernment is established.

THE MEDIEVAL ERA

At this point, we turn toward the next major period of theological activity, the Medieval Period or the Middle Ages. It is important to note that the first major schism in church history occurred in 1054,

5 Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 7.

with the separation of the Eastern and Western churches over theological differences. As a result, our overview of doctrinal development will proceed to trace the Western Church, though we should recognize the rich theological tradition that will continue to develop among Eastern Orthodox churches. The Medieval Era, at least until the thirteenth century, is sometimes considered an intellectual low point in the development of the church's teachings. Pelikan refers to it as the "age of faith" in the sense of believing the church's teachings that were established in the Patristic writings; in particular, Augustine's theology often prevails as the dominant voice.⁶ Thus, it is suggested that the Medieval Era represents a fixing or consolidation of the Patristic writings more than the development of new theological concerns.

Several important institutions that also shape the church's theology arose during this period: monastic orders and the university. First, monastic and religious orders were formed during this period, and each expressed a particular theology as the basis for their life together. Some of the most important monastic writings came from women, such as Hildegard of Bingen, Catherine of Siena, and Julian of Norwich. Religious orders, for example the Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians, participated in the academic study of theology as universities came into existence. Their central concerns were the role of reason (which will then add a third source to the task of theology, alongside scripture and tradition) and the systemization of the church's doctrines.

We have already mentioned the rise of scholasticism in relation to the development of theology as an academic discipline. The speculative divinity of scholasticism—with its impulse toward synthesizing

6 Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 3: *The Growth of Medieval Theology (600–1300)* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978), 4, 50.

Christian doctrine, providing for a reasoned justification of those teachings, and debating theological and philosophical questions—represented the essence of theological activity in this period. Peter Lombard’s *Four Books of Sentences*, which systematized and wrestled with the contradictions and questions in the Patristic teachings, especially those of Augustine, became the standard theological text studied in the medieval universities. But the height of the period is marked by Saint Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica*. The excerpt below provides a sense of the form and content of Aquinas’s theological and philosophical investigations.

Question 83: Of Free Will

Whether Man has Free-Will?

Objection 1. It would seem that man has not free-will. For whoever has free-will does what he wills. But man does not what he wills, for it is written (Rom 7:19): *For the good which I will I do not, but the evil which I will not, that I do.* Therefore man has not free-will. . . .

I answer that, Man has free-will: otherwise counsels, exhortations, commands, prohibitions, rewards and punishments would be in vain. . . . man acts from judgment, because by his apprehensive power he judges that something should be avoided or sought. But because this judgment, in the case of some particular act, is not from a natural instinct, but from some act of comparison in the reason, therefore he acts from free judgment. . . . And forasmuch as man is rational it is necessary that man have a free-will.⁷

Did you notice the pattern of Aquinas’s theological argument, moving from objection or the case against the stated question to his answer, which addresses the initial objection or criticism? This short excerpt is typical of scholastic writings, and should enable you to see more

⁷ *A Shorter Summa: The Essential Philosophical Passages of St. Thomas Aquinas’ Summa Theologica*, ed. Peter Kreeft (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 111.

clearly how the exercise of reason and reasoned discourse became a primary source for theological engagement during the Medieval Era.

In sum, the questions of faith and reason and their relationship to each other were central concerns for medieval theology, as well as the development of a more comprehensive and systematic approach to or method of articulating what Christians believe and practice. This era saw the emergence of tradition as a source for theology, as the chaos of the Patristic Era settled into the institutionalizing of the medieval church and theologians. Remember that in this era there were essentially two streams of Christian thought: the Western Church, which we would think of as Roman Catholicism, and the Eastern Church or Eastern Orthodoxy. This twofold pattern of Christian faith was soon to change radically as a result of deep theological differences among the faithful.

THE REFORMATION

The advent of the Reformation in the sixteenth century marks a turning point in theological development with the rise of doctrinal pluralism unlike that which was seen in previous eras. Especially important was the rise of Protestant streams of theology, which would become the basis for distinct denominational doctrines. We will examine the key teachings of Luther and Calvin, and the fundamental claim to the authority of scripture (*sola scriptura*, scripture alone) that stands in contrast to the growing emphasis on tradition within the Roman Catholic community.

Perhaps the driving force behind the Reformation was this idea that scripture should be the rule by which beliefs and practices are measured, and it is the only source necessary for theology. This position arises in response to not only scholasticism's speculative nature but also questionable practices present in the church, such as the abuses of indulgences, a practice intended for the remission of the

penalty of sin. The Reformers, as Pelikan describes, were concerned primarily with “the ‘wrong teaching’ in the church, from which the ‘wrong conduct’ proceeded.”⁸

The theology of Martin Luther (1483–1546) is definitive for the Reformation and provides us with a clear example of how the theological concerns of an individual become the concerns and, ultimately, the doctrinal affirmations of a community of faith. Today, of course, Luther’s theology is normative for Lutheran communities of faith. Several theological concerns were at the forefront of Luther’s teachings: 1) justification by faith, 2) the primacy of the Word in the life of the church, and 3) the theology of the cross. Let’s address each of these briefly.

First, Luther’s emphasis on justification by faith or justification by grace through faith becomes the hallmark of Reformation thought. Justification is, of course, the forgiveness of sins, and the question for Luther was how a sinful person can be forgiven by a righteous God. In the sixteenth century, forgiveness was generally offered by the priest through practices of penitence and indulgences, which could absolve the believer of the condemnation of sin. Luther questioned the validity and certainty of the forgiveness dispensed by human beings who are without righteousness by their own merit. Through his reading of scripture, Luther concluded that the whole of the gospel is the message of justification by faith and the absolute need for God’s grace. In contrast to what is known as “works-righteousness,” or salvation through the accomplishing of good works, Luther stood firmly on the belief that salvation is possible only by the grace of God through the righteousness of Christ and can be received only by faith. All righteousness belongs to God. Even the justified believer remains a sinful

8 Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 4: *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300–1700)* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984), 247.

creature, *simul justus et peccator*, simultaneously justified and sinful, with one foot in the new creation and the other planted in the old one. We should also note that Luther does not mean the kind of faith that is intellectually believed (*fides quae creditur*) or the knowledge of God's saving work, as was frequently the case in the Medieval Era, but rather means faith as an act of trust or confidence in Christ (*fides qua creditur*).

Let's pause here for another opportunity for close reading of a text with an excerpt from Martin Luther's "The Freedom of a Christian" (1520). As you read, try to follow his argument about justification by faith not works.

Since, therefore, this faith can rule only in the inner man, as Rom. 10[:10] says, "For man believes with his heart and so is justified," and since faith alone justifies, it is clear that the inner man cannot be justified, freed, or saved by any outer work or action at all, and that these works, whatever their character, have nothing to do with the inner man. On the other hand, only ungodliness and unbelief of heart, and no outer work, make him guilty and a damnable servant of sin. Wherefore it ought to be the first concern of every Christian to lay aside all confidence in works and increasingly to strengthen faith alone and through faith to grow in the knowledge, not of works, but of Christ Jesus, who suffered and rose for him, as Peter teaches in the last chapter of his first Epistle (1 Pet. 5:10). No other work makes a Christian.⁹

You probably found Luther's theology relatively easy to follow in this passage. He concludes that only the "work" of growing in faith in Jesus Christ can justify the human being, and that the act of faith leads to knowledge of the faith. Here he points to the heart of this doctrine of "faith alone" or, in Latin, *sola fide*. There is nothing the human

9 "The Freedom of a Christian," *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 599.

being can do to save himself or herself. There is no means of forgiveness apart from faith in Christ. This is justification by faith. But notice that *sola fide* goes hand-in-hand with the teaching of *sola scriptura* or “scripture alone” as the source for theology. In the few sentences above, Luther draws on Paul’s letter to the Romans as well as 1 Peter. This referencing of scripture is characteristic of Luther’s writings.

The second doctrine central to Luther’s teachings, then, is this emphasis on *sola scriptura* or scripture as the only valid authority for theological discernment. In the doctrine of justification by faith, the writings of Paul were Luther’s primary authority or source material, though we should note that his interpretation of Paul has been subject to criticism over the centuries. Nonetheless, for Luther the Bible contains all that is necessary for salvation. In a recent article, Hans Wiersma clarifies that *sola scriptura* does not mean the uncritical appropriation of the Bible. He argues that it is possible “to assert the principle of *Sola Scriptura* in a manner similar to the bumper sticker that says: ‘The Bible Says It, I Believe It, That Settles It.’ However, a Lutheran theological approach resists simplification. For Lutheran Christians, reading the Bible does not mean setting aside critical thinking skills.”¹⁰ Indeed, we can see in Luther’s own writings a very careful and reasoned examination of scripture. Luther’s is a distinctly deliberative theology. This emphasis on the authority of scripture forms one of the basic commitments of the Reformation and Protestantism, and it stands in contrast to Roman Catholicism’s affirmation of the tradition as authoritative for Christian teachings and for the discernment of the meaning of biblical texts.

The third teaching of Luther with which we should be familiar is known as the “theology of the cross,” and suggests that Christ is

10 Hans Wiersma, “A Brief Introduction to *sola scriptura*,” *Lutheran Theology: An Online Journal*, <http://lutherantheology.wordpress.com/2011/01/18/a-brief-introduction-to-sola-scriptura/> (accessed July 1, 2014).

known in his suffering. This doctrine, like that of justification by faith, arose out of Luther's reading of Paul's letters in the New Testament. In contrast to the justification of works-righteousness, Luther held that human righteousness comes only by means of the cross of Jesus Christ: our sins are satisfied through his action vicariously on the cross. Moreover, the cross also represents the only access to an authentic knowledge of God and of salvation, though God remains hidden even as God is revealed in Christ. This theology of the cross articulated by Luther stands in contrast to the "theology of glory," a theology that stresses the human capacity to know God by means of reason and philosophical speculation, which he believed the scholastics espoused. Hence, for Luther, both knowledge of God and salvation are, again, utterly dependent upon faith and grace and upon the Word, which is Jesus Christ.

The second pivotal Reformation theologian, John Calvin (1509–1564), also appealed directly to the authority of the Bible for his teachings. Today, of course, Calvin's theology has been affirmed by Reformed churches, such as Presbyterians, as normative doctrine. Calvin takes exception to the Lutheran concept of scriptural authority and suggests that the presence and will of God must also be embraced. Luther, in keeping with the Catholic heritage, affirmed the real, not symbolic, presence of God in the sacraments. By contrast, Calvin argued that in the sacraments we find true representation (re-presentation), a spiritual but not physical presence of God. The Word is the means by which God's will may be known, and the sacraments confirm that will. Thus, for Calvin, in the Word and the sacraments working together, God is spiritually present. We see, then, that the Bible is also a primary authority for Calvin's theology, but in conversation with the sacraments as the basis for confirming God's revealed, yet hidden will.

Perhaps the most significant doctrinal development in Calvin's thought is what is known as "double predestination," a position that Calvin found represented in the teachings of Augustine, as well as the Bible. While Luther taught only the belief in election to salvation,

Calvin taught that God predestined some to salvation and others to damnation. This position is consistent with his emphasis on the sovereignty of God and the total depravity, or sinfulness, of the human creature. Calvin concluded that believers will place their trust in being among the elect to salvation, despite the fact that they may never know with certainty the actual will of God for their ultimate end. It is a way of saying that we choose to trust God above and before all else.

Once again, we turn to a close reading of a primary text. In this case, an excerpt from John Calvin's *Institutes* on the difficulties of the doctrine of election.

If it is plain that it comes to pass by God's bidding that salvation is freely offered to some while others are barred from access to it, at once great and difficult questions spring up, explicable only when reverent minds regard as settled what they may suitably hold concerning election and predestination. A baffling question this seems to many. For they think nothing more inconsistent than that out of the common multitude of men some should be predestined to salvation, others to destruction. . . . We shall never be clearly persuaded, as we ought to be, that our salvation flows from the wellspring of God's free mercy until we come to know his eternal election, which illumines God's grace by this contrast: that he does not indiscriminately adopt all into the hope of salvation but gives to some what he denies to others.¹¹

In wrestling with the doctrine of election and salvation, especially the notion that God chooses some for damnation, are you able to grasp the theological and spiritual basis for Calvin's claim? Calvin places all grace, all mercy, all sovereignty, all will to determine salvation in the hands of God. There is no human response required or possible. Though as United Methodists we do not believe in predestination or

11 *Calvin's Institutes: A New Compend* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 113.

double predestination, we can still grasp the power of throwing ourselves utterly and entirely upon God's mercy and of choosing to love God and follow Christ, whether or not we are chosen for salvation. That is a demonstrable act of faith.

The followers of Calvin would continue to develop his teachings on double predestination and God's will as keys to the Christian life. At the Synod of Dort (1618–1619), which was held among the Dutch Reformed churches to dispute the rise of Arminianism (a theology of grace), the Calvinist doctrinal position was reinforced and became normative. Today, we often use the acronym TULIP to represent the key teachings or five points of Calvinism: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints or the elect to salvation. The followers of theologian Jacob Arminius, known as the Remonstrants, objected to the predestinarianism of Calvin, arguing that God's will in Christ is for universal salvation, for all to be saved through faith in Christ. Although this Arminian position was rejected at the Synod of Dort, as we will soon see, it became a central teaching in the rise of Methodism in the eighteenth century, and serves to distinguish Wesley's Methodists from the teachings of Luther and Calvin.

While our account of the doctrines of the Christian faith henceforth is concerned with the Protestant tradition, we should note that Roman Catholicism responded to the Reformation and its criticisms at the Council of Trent (1545–1563). There they would clarify doctrines and affirm the importance of the apostolic succession in handing down the truth of the gospel from generation to generation, thus placing authority for the church's teachings in the tradition as much as in the scriptures. Like the Reformers, the Catholic Counter-Reformation would turn to Augustine's writings and find support for their emphasis on the primacy of the church or tradition.

By now we should begin to see that both the Bible and the early Christian theologians can be interpreted in various ways. Some streams

of the Christian faith will claim to be the only true interpretation, while most Christians today recognize that there are varieties of faithful interpretations and expressions of the Christian faith down through the ages. Those who seek the one true way of following Christ will sometimes become so rigid in their thinking as to miss the movement of the Spirit and the presence of God in the world.

Before turning to the Modern Era and its wealth of theological activity, we want to mention one other theological stream that arose during the Reformation: Anabaptism. Although the source of its development remains disputed—no one can say with certainty where and how it came to be—the primary teaching was the rejection of infant baptism and the need to rebaptize in a believer's baptism. This was, of course, a radical break from the institutional church. While some might think that today's Anabaptists are found in various threads of the Baptist churches, in fact, Anabaptism is continued among Christian groups such as the Amish, Moravians, and Hutterites. Anabaptists are sometimes called the Radical Reformers because their doctrines seek to uphold an extreme biblical purity.

This brings us to a brief summary of the Reformation Era. What would you think, at this point, are some of the major teachings that arose during this period? If you pointed to the notion of *sola scriptura* and the authority of the Bible for the church's doctrine, that would be a sound response. If you named the rise of doctrinal pluralism—the varieties of teachings now dotting the Christian landscape—that, too, would be a good answer. Perhaps you named the emphasis on justification by faith. We have also noted the emergence of new ways of expressing the meaning of salvation in Christ and the significance of God's will for the faithful. Yet, even as the Reformers introduced new doctrines, we should not miss the continuity with the church teachings that were developed in earlier eras: the importance of the person of Jesus Christ and the Trinity remained central to Reformation teachings, as did a reliance on the writings of the Patristic Era (though,

admittedly, they can be read to support different positions, much like the Bible). Finally, of course, while the Reformation theologians did not reject entirely the authority of the church as the source for the normativity of doctrines, they did stand in contrast to the teachings of Roman Catholicism by privileging the Word of God in the Bible as their primary source. The privileged place of scripture also led the Protestant churches (with the exception of those in the Anglican tradition) to confirm only two sacraments—baptism and Holy Communion—in distinction from the seven found in Roman Catholicism. These doctrines that emerged in the Protestant Reformation would continue to undergo refinement and further development in the centuries that followed.

THE MODERN ERA

The Modern Era of theological and doctrinal activity is marked by a distinct shift intellectually and theologically, due to the rise of Enlightenment thought. To grasp the contours of the Modern Era, we need to become familiar with three key thinkers and the basic assumptions or the mind-set that shaped this period of theological activity. In many ways, you and I today have been profoundly shaped by the Enlightenment, even if we are not conscious of that influence. Though many philosophers were instrumental in articulating the ideas and the spirit of the Modern Era, these three will help us to grasp its basic framework: René Descartes, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant.

The French mathematician, scientist, and philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650) was among the first thinkers to engage what would become fundamental concepts of the Enlightenment and modernity. He is best remembered for the phrase *cogito ergo sum*, which translates, “I think, therefore I am.” This phrase might be considered shorthand for the rise of reason as the primary source for discovering truth and knowledge. Descartes would suggest that our capacity to think and reason does not depend upon sense experience or the

physical world. In addition, Descartes's philosophy might also be considered the genesis of the turn to the individual and individual autonomy, which will culminate in the individualism of late modernity.

The Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–1776) likewise investigated questions of epistemology (the study of knowledge) and argued that the basis for philosophy (or theology, for that matter) should be observation and fact, rather than “superstition.” For Hume and others, religious authorities would be included among the superstitious, a skepticism often expressed in contemporary society. Hume's *Natural History of Religions* (1757) is generally considered to be the first empirical (i.e., derived from observation) study of religion, arguing for a developmental or evolutionary model in which polytheistic religions are inferior to the later and more advanced monotheistic religions (though Hume would also suggest that polytheistic religions are more tolerant than monotheistic ones). Thus, in Hume's work we see the importance of a rational and empirical consideration of faith, as well as a sense of progress or steady improvement over time.

The height of Enlightenment thought is found in the writings of the most influential thinker of the modern period, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Kant builds upon the philosophy of Descartes, Hume, and others in three important “Critiques” (i.e., reasoned investigations of what can be known apart from experience). In these three major works, he asks: 1) what can we know? (*Critique of Pure Reason*); 2) what ought we do? (*Critique of Practical Reason*); and 3) what may we hope? (*Critique of Judgment*). Significantly, Kant suggested that human reason alone and apart from any reference to God or experience provides us with the basis for making moral judgments. We do not need the beliefs of Christian faith or the supposed rewards and punishment of God in order to know how we should live and what we should do. Kant's point was not to deny the existence of God (as some later interpreters of Kant would do), but rather, to advance the notion that human beings would have the capacity to

make moral choices even if God did not exist. Thus, in Kant, reason becomes the central human attribute that enables us to pursue moral perfection. We should also note Kant's emphasis upon the capacities of the human being apart from relying on the grace or will of God.

There are, of course, countless other philosophers, scientists, and writers who shaped the Enlightenment and modernity—far too many to mention in this brief introduction. What is most relevant for our discussion here are the basic precepts or the mind-set that took hold during the Modern Era. We can point to several key ideas that shaped modern sensibilities and directly influenced the theological works that were produced. Different authors have named or organized these ideas in different ways, but they point toward the same general set of intellectual assumptions.

- ◆ First, modernity held an optimistic view of human potential.
- ◆ Second, there was a suspicion of traditional authorities, including the church.
- ◆ Third, modernity emphasized reason, and more important, the autonomous rational self or individual who could make judgments apart from those of authorities.
- ◆ Fourth, there was also a belief in progress or perfectibility through science and technology, through fact and observation, toward a utopian future.
- ◆ Fifth, in modernity, faith and religion became “private” matters as opposed to “public” concerns. As we will soon see, these modern assumptions shape the theological activity of the period, as they are incorporated into theological proposals by some and critiqued by others.

As we examine a few key theologians representative of the Modern Era, we should keep in mind not only the distinct mind-set of

modernity, but also that, on the heels of the Reformation, there were now a wide variety of theological positions, though few of these theologies would become doctrinal standards. One clear exception is the theology of John Wesley, which would eventually be affirmed as the basic doctrinal standards for today's United Methodism. So, we begin with a word on the theology of Wesley, who lived at the cusp of the Enlightenment. Then we briefly examine the following key theologians and theological movements: Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, Barth, Bonhoeffer, Tillich, liberation theologies, and what we will refer to here under the general rubric of "relational" theologies. As you read, it may be helpful to jot down the key ideas of these modern theologians, in order to compare and contrast their theologies. But first, let's turn our attention to the other major denominational "founder," John Wesley, and his theology.

John Wesley

John Wesley (1703–1791) began a renewal movement within the Church of England: an "evangelical" movement, in the eighteenth-century use of the word, which means experiential. For Wesley, the church was going through the motions; it had the form of religion, but not a deep spirituality, devotion, or experience of God. Though his writings are not systematic and his theology is primarily articulated in sermons and treatises, Wesley's theology has become normative for those in the broader Methodist tradition. Remember that at the Synod of Dort, the followers of Jacob Arminius argued against the Calvinist position that prevailed. Yet the Arminian position endured. Decades later, Wesley developed and applied the theology of grace espoused by Arminius and his followers, the Remonstrants.

In contrast to the Calvinist position represented by the acronym TULIP, Wesley taught that 1) although human beings are totally depraved or sinful, they are also preveniently graced; 2) election is conditional only in the sense that people must choose to accept God's

freely offered grace; 3) atonement is unlimited, in that Christ died for all; 4) God's grace is resistible; and 5) those who continue to rely on grace have the assurance of their salvation. Wesley's theology thus suggested a divine-human synergism in which salvation is a lifelong process by which, through openness to and reliance on the grace of God, we may be perfected in love or sanctified. Wesley also drew upon experience as a source for his theology in addition to the existing triad of scripture, tradition, and reason, though Wesley held scripture to be primary, in continuity with the Reformation emphasis on *sola scriptura*.

We should note that, in keeping with the onset of Enlightenment thought, Wesley took the science of his day quite seriously, though never at the sacrifice of the sovereignty and work of God in the world. Indeed, on the question of God's sovereignty, Wesley would claim to be only a "hair's breadth" away from Calvin, though he largely argued against Calvinist doctrines. As we examine select modern theologians and their projects in the following pages, keep in mind that Wesley's basic theological framework endures as doctrinally normative for United Methodists. These are the beliefs we agree to preach and teach, while recognizing and even learning from many other credible ways to express the reality of God and the life of faith.

Friedrich Schleiermacher

Our overview of a few theologians who are shaped by and, in turn, shape the modern mind-set, begins with the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834). Schleiermacher was a theologian in the Reformed tradition (think: Calvin), and is often considered the father of liberal Protestantism, since his theological writings provide the basic conceptual framework for theological liberalism (not to be confused with political liberalism). Writing during the rise of Romanticism—a movement that reacted against the captivity to reason and empiricism during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—Schleiermacher addressed the "cultured despisers" of his day

(think: apologetics) and sought to make the Christian faith relevant by appealing to “feeling” or knowing God affectively, not simply intellectually. In his major work, *The Christian Faith*, Schleiermacher defined religion in terms of a “feeling of absolute dependence,” a sense and taste for the infinite, or a sort of God-consciousness. In Schleiermacher, we find an important turn to the individual’s engagement with the infinite, as well as a desire to make the Christian faith meaningful in light of the culture in which it existed. In Schleiermacher, the individual human being comes to the forefront as an entry point for theological reflection.

Today, in the twenty-first century, the word *liberal* is widely used and, in relation to theology, generally misused and misunderstood. Classic theological liberalism, as inspired by Schleiermacher, has several distinct dimensions that arose in response to the Enlightenment. Classic liberalism is characterized by optimism in the human potential, through reason and experience, to interpret scripture and know the divine apart from traditional authorities. In addition, there is an intentional engagement of the culture and common human experience that suggests Christian faith need not be opposed to cultural forms but can be expressed within them. Liberalism tends to utilize historical-critical methods of interpretation, taking scientific knowledge seriously; and accepts the premise that we possess the capacity to make moral judgments—and thereby make progress toward the greater good—without dependence upon the commandments or will of God. Of course, variations on these themes are many, and what is considered “liberal” inevitably depends upon one’s perspective. Nonetheless, when speaking of theological liberalism, we should recognize the meaning and contours of classic liberalism.

Søren Kierkegaard

In Denmark, Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), who is a product of the Lutheran tradition, also emphasized the individual and experience in his

theological and philosophical writings. Usually, we refer to his theology as “existentialism,” in which a person’s salvation or damnation depends greatly upon individual choices. Existentialists grant that human beings have a significant measure of freedom to act and to create their lives. This responsibility results in a situation of “angst” or anxiety as we experience the dread or fear associated with having the freedom to choose and, quite possibly, to choose wrongly. The religious life, governed by faith in God and allowing for the suspension of reason, is the highest form of existence and includes a personal and subjective experience of God. For Kierkegaard, faith and religion, as the pursuit of spiritual development, are largely a personal, individual process. It is Kierkegaard who first regards faith as a “leap” or a suspension of reason in pursuit of the divine, and in his theological writings, the human being and our human condition of anxiety serve as the starting point for theological reflection. Kierkegaard’s existentialism shaped and influenced a number of theologians and theological proposals throughout the Modern Era.

Karl Barth

Of course, there was considerably more theological activity in the nineteenth century, but at this point we transition into the twentieth century and the rise of neo-orthodoxy, a movement associated with the Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968), who published *The Epistle to the Romans* (in German, *Der Römerbrief*) in 1919. This landmark statement, the opening to a long theological career, was a direct response to the classic liberalism of his day, especially in light of the horrors of World War I, which cast doubt on the liberal optimism of human freedom and progress toward a better world. Barth rejects the starting point of the human being and begins, instead, with the wholly other or transcendent God, utterly unknowable and unapproachable apart from Jesus Christ, who is the mediator between God and humanity. The self-revelation of the Word of God also figures prominently in Barth’s theology as a threefold word of Jesus

Christ, scripture, and the church's proclamation. Barth's unfinished major theological work, *Church Dogmatics*, best illustrates his "life-long search . . . to establish a strong position for orthodox Christian faith in a world in which it had been marginalized."¹²

Barth, then, is associated with the movement known as neo-orthodoxy ("neo," meaning new or recent, and "orthodoxy," literally, right teaching), which rejected the nineteenth century's turn to culture and the human potential and sought to restore Reformation teachings in large measure. Yet, given the insights of the Enlightenment and the modern mind-set, neo-orthodoxy was a reinterpretation of earlier orthodox teachings and, of course, conversant with Calvin's theology. Barth accepted scientific and historical methods and knowledge, as well as the relevance of the gospel message to the realities of the world, even though he rejected the liberal optimism in the human potential and sought to reclaim an utter dependence upon God and the cross of Jesus Christ.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

In Germany, during the rise of National Socialism, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), whose theological roots lay in Lutheranism, crafted a unique theological statement that resists easy categorization, especially since his life and theological career were cut short due to his participation in the German resistance in World War II. Bonhoeffer has been appreciated by more traditional communities and more progressive ones alike, but for different dimensions of his theology.

On the one hand, Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* and *The Cost of Discipleship* offer a rather traditional and scriptural approach to theological reflection, though deeply meaningful and insightful. Bonhoeffer's theology is concerned with the church, the Christian life, and the

12 Daniel W. Hardy, "Karl Barth," in *The Modern Theologians*, ed. David F. Ford (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 36.

meaning of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, Bonhoeffer is also known for unusual and fragmentary theological concerns, largely found in his writings while imprisoned, which have been the source of great debate. Some suggest that his notion of “religionless Christianity” serves to emphasize faith rather than institutional religion and that Bonhoeffer envisioned the end of the church as an institution. Bonhoeffer displayed openness to other religions in his concern for Judaism and the Old Testament, as well as his expressed desire to travel to India to meet Gandhi and find “Christ” in the East. Bonhoeffer’s last work, unfinished at the time of his death, was a manuscript on ethics, leading some to propose that a mature Bonhoeffer might have been an ethicist more than a theologian. In sum, Bonhoeffer remains something of an enigma, difficult to locate within a theological movement. Perhaps his theology represents a transitional project leading from liberalism and neo-orthodoxy toward liberation theologies. Unfortunately, we will never know what Bonhoeffer might have become and written had he lived into his forties and beyond.

Paul Tillich

A second product of the tragic realities of World War II was the German Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich (1886–1965), who spent the better part of his theological career in the United States. Tillich’s three-volume *Systematic Theology* displays both classic liberal and existential concerns, and his “method of correlation” sought to answer the philosophical questions of the culture by means of the theological message of the gospel. This correlation of culture and Christian faith continued the liberal concern for speaking meaningfully to the contemporary culture. Tillich also wrote of the anxiety of potential non-being given the horrors witnessed in the world. A product of the 1950s and 1960s, Tillich engaged the symbols and insights of depth psychology, as well as numerous philosophical and theological predecessors to create a rich and intricate theological system. To the

anxious question of the possibility of non-being, Tillich proposed the answer present in the Christian message of "Being Itself," or God as our "ultimate concern." The question of "estrangement," which is Tillich's symbol for sin, is answered by the Christian symbol of the New Being in Jesus as the Christ. The fragmentation and ambiguity of existence are answered by the Christian message of the divine Spirit by which we are grasped into a state of unity and unambiguous life. Tillich's theology was widely influential in the 1960s and 1970s and continues to be an important source for contemporary theologians.

Liberation Theologies

In 1969, amid the tumult of the Civil Rights movement, protests over the Vietnam War, the end of colonialism, and other dramatic events, a new theological movement was initiated with the publication of *Black Theology and Black Power* by James Cone (b. 1938). In Latin America, the Peruvian Catholic theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez (b. 1928) was simultaneously at work on a "theology of liberation," though it would not be published in English until 1973 (in Spanish, it appeared in 1971). As a result, Cone's theology was the first major work of liberation theology widely available in North America. Cone was concerned with the question of how one can be Black and Christian, given the ways in which Christian religion has been used to dehumanize and oppress African Americans in direct contradiction to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Thus, Cone argues that the scriptural witnesses demonstrate that God is on the side of the oppressed and marginalized, and the liberation of those who are oppressed is at the heart of the gospel.

A multitude of liberation theologies have since emerged, not only in the Americas, but across the globe, including Feminist, Womanist, Latino, Mujerista, Asian, African, Dalit, and many others. Liberation theologies claim not only the starting point of God's preferential option for the poor, marginalized, and powerless, but also a concern for justice as essential to any theological statement. One of their most important

contributions has been the introduction of the concept of systemic sin, which suggests that there are systems and structures, institutional arrangements, that perpetrate and perpetuate sin and that we participate knowingly and unknowingly in those sinful systems, thereby making us complicit. We will return to the concept of systemic sin in chapter 4. Significantly, liberation theologies challenged the notion of any theological statement as “neutral” or context-free and therefore universally valid—a consideration we will examine more carefully in the next chapter.

Relational Theologies

Finally, in more recent years a variety of theological proposals have appeared on the landscape that we might refer to more broadly as relational theologies, due to their emphasis on or starting point in the notion of the interrelatedness of all of creation with the divine. We might include process theologies, economic theologies, and ecological theologies in this broadly conceived theological movement, which responds to concerns of the late twentieth century including globalism, inequality, and the problem of evil. One example of a relational theology is the ecological theology of Sallie McFague (b. 1933), which can be viewed as an outgrowth of her earlier work in feminist liberation theology, with its expansion toward a concern for the liberation of the whole of creation and not just people. McFague’s *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (1993) introduced the metaphor of God’s body as a way of referring to the world and the need to liberate a burdened and suffering creation. Her basic premise states that “all beings and processes on the planet, are interrelated, and that the well-being of each is connected to the well-being of the whole.”¹³ This sense of the interwoven relationships of all living things with one another and God leads to a basic premise: salvation, healing, and wholeness are

13 Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 8.

not only human concerns but cosmic ones. Relational theologies, of course, represent a wide and varied group of theological writings and concerns, but McFague's proposal enables us to grasp the centrality of relationality in these projects, despite their differences.

Evangelical Theology

One final theological movement worth mentioning is evangelical theology in the modern period. Evangelicalism was initially related to the Reformation and, as we have seen, was associated with the rise of Methodism in England in the eighteenth century. In earlier times, and in other languages such as Spanish and German, *evangelical* has been used synonymously with *Protestant*. However, in the twentieth century and beyond, the meaning of *evangelical* has shifted to reflect a theological position generally associated with a basic pattern of beliefs, described by historian Mark Noll to include: 1) conversion, 2) the Bible as containing all spiritual truth, 3) a concern for evangelism and mission, and 4) the centrality of the cross in providing for the atonement of sin and salvation.¹⁴ While evangelicals are often found among non-denominational churches, the movement crosses over denominational lines and is present in various institutional and theological expressions. As is true of any theological movement, the eighteenth-century evangelicalism of John Wesley's Methodists is not identical to nineteenth- and twentieth-century evangelical movements led by figures such as Charles Finney, D. L. Moody, and Billy Graham.

THE POSTMODERN ERA

Before concluding our brief account of the periods of theological activity, we should acknowledge the shift that has occurred in recent

14 Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 19. Noll relies upon the work of David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

decades, in which the basic assumptions of modernity are unraveling. The confidence in the human potential and reason—including the capacity of science and technology to solve all our problems—has eroded, calling into question the height of individualism and the subsequent loss of many forms of community. Thus, we find ourselves at the cusp of a new period of intellectual and theological history, often referred to as the Postmodern Era.

Postmodernity is best characterized by reference to the unraveling of the modern assumptions; however, the shape of the new intellectual milieu, in a positive or constructive sense, has not yet come into clear focus. Perhaps the Millennial generation, sometimes referred to as “digital natives,” will provide us with the great theological works born out of the postmodern worldview.

Regrettably, our brief overview of theological activity across the centuries has omitted many significant theological voices and could certainly be critiqued for this reason. But our purpose has not been to provide a comprehensive account of all theologians and theological movements, but rather, to provide an awareness of the streams of theological engagement and to encourage you to begin sorting through the various positions, so that you might discern where your own theological positions have their roots and find their energy. When reading a particular theologian, it is always helpful to ask questions about the context, time frame, starting point, and prior influences that shape and ground the theological project. These considerations help us to better understand the perspective from which he or she writes, whether or not we agree with that theological position. This is an important reminder: whenever we study theology, our goal is to hear one another with open minds and hearts and to seek understanding, even if we do not agree.

Before we conclude this chapter, we have one last piece of information to introduce that will also help you engage in future theological study. At several points we offered short excerpts from various

theologians so that you might read and interpret them for yourself. Whenever we read the actual writings of a theologian, we are engaging primary texts or sources. These original writings may be somewhat difficult reading, but the fact that they continue to endure over decades and centuries tells us that they contain significant insights for the Christian faith. However, when we read a book about someone's theology—for example, an interpretation of Karl Barth's *Epistle to the Romans* or an overview of Augustine's *City of God*—we are engaging secondary texts or sources.

The best way to know and understand any theologian is to read the primary sources yourself, but secondary sources can help you to wrestle with and make sense of those texts. So then, how would you categorize this short introduction you are reading now? Of course, this is a secondary source that provides a limited and basic overview of many theologians and doctrines. But our goal is to provide you with a taste for theology and a roadmap for navigating the discipline, so that you will be encouraged and able to read theology and primary texts in the future. If you are ready to go a little deeper still, then the next chapter will introduce you to how we do theology, its methods and sources.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. As United Methodist pastors, why is it important to know and understand United Methodist doctrines, in contrast to those held by other denominations?
2. Can you think of a time when you heard a sermon or participated in a class where someone neglected to distinguish his or her own theology from the church-community's doctrines? How do you feel about preachers presenting their own theological views in sermons?

3. We explored some of the motivations for the development of doctrine over time. Which motivations do you think are most evident in the contemporary period and why?
4. Skim back through the eras of theological activity. What are the theological debates or doctrines that you found most surprising or most unlike your own beliefs? Do you think some theological eras were more important than others for the development of the church's teachings? Why?
5. Where does John Wesley fit into the stream of theological development? Can you place him in the context in which his theology arose?

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

A good theological dictionary or encyclopedia of theology will provide you with an introduction to most of the important theological figures and debates through which doctrine has developed.

Blackwell Publishing has produced a series of volumes introducing the theology of each of the Christian eras, beginning with *The First Christian Theologians*, edited by G. R. Evans. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004.

Pelikan, Jaroslav. *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. While difficult reading, each of the five volumes contains a wealth of information about the history of doctrinal development.

Wiles, Maurice. *The Making of Christian Doctrine*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967.

HOW DO WE DO **THEOLOGY?**

A pastor sits down to begin work on her sermon for the coming Sunday. Like most pastors, she goes through a process each week leading to the message that is preached from the pulpit. Perhaps she meditates on the lectionary readings or reviews the sermon series she's offering. Then, in an attitude of prayer, she engages in exegesis of the text, consulting commentaries and Bible dictionaries to understand the passage as best she can. The theme of her sermon is justification, so she also reads some theological resources to help refresh her memory on what John Wesley believed about justification and how other theologians have thought about forgiveness. She also reviews what United Methodists believe about justification. Armed with this background, the pastor outlines the sermon, choosing appropriate illustrations, and possibly prepares a full manuscript. Then she practices until the sermon is lodged in her memory in time to step into the pulpit on Sunday morning. This process, which the pastor follows faithfully each week, is what we might call her method. Good method leads to good outcomes in preaching and, importantly, in the doing of theology.

In the first two chapters we considered two questions: 1) What is theology? and 2) How has theology developed over the centuries?

Now in chapter 3, we turn to the question of how we do theology. This question points us to *prolegomena* (literally, “things said before”), the preliminaries that enable us to make careful and deliberative claims about God and the life of faith. We refer to these concerns that shape how we do theology as theological method. Because theology is fundamentally related to language and the careful use of language to express things unseen, our preliminary considerations begin with how language about God functions and should be engaged. Once we have some facility with theological language, our study of prolegomena then considers the norm for doing theology—the standard or yardstick—against which our claims should be measured. Then we will examine the sources for doing theology—scripture, tradition, reason, and experience—as well as mention newer sources that have been introduced in recent decades and the question of culture or context for doing theology. This chapter concludes with a brief consideration of how different theological projects demonstrate different central concerns or starting points. Identifying the central concern can help us to read theology with greater comprehension.

■ THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE

Our only way to share who God is and the life of faith is by means of language. It is a unique gift given to human beings. Suggesting that language is the only way to share our faith in God does not imply that we cannot bear witness with our lives and actions, or that we cannot experience the reality of God. It does indicate that language provides us with access to God in a way that is uniquely important to the life of faith. The book of Genesis tells us that God created by speaking the cosmos into existence, declaring it to be good. We recognize that God gave human beings the Word become flesh, Jesus Christ, and the words of scripture to enable us to know God more fully, though never completely. Our use of language can limit how God is known in our

lives and communities of faith or it can express the infinite, wondrous, elusive, immense reality of God and encourage us to know the divine more deeply. In this section, we begin by considering how easy it is to limit the word and revelation of God by the paucity of our own human words. By doing so, we are then better able to grasp how expansive and even poetic language opens us to a deeper and wider knowledge of who God is and what God intends for the world. In ministry, we should always seek to expand the congregation's understanding of God while deepening the mystery that can never be fully known.

Let's begin by considering the language you normally use to refer to God. If you are like many pastors and church members, you have often heard God spoken of as "Father" and have adopted this as the appropriate way to refer to God. Some pastors I know pray by inserting the word *father* in every sentence. Of course, the early church did use the language of Father, as did Jesus in speaking of *Abba* (an expression of intimacy), but there is far more to consider before drawing any conclusions about its correctness. Remember, deliberative theology thinks carefully about what we say and do, while embedded theology simply repeats or echoes others.

When we speak of God as "Father," we are using a metaphor in which we speak of one thing in terms of another. We are saying, "God *is like* a father." But every metaphor breaks down at some point, and we encounter the opposite: "God *is not like* a father." It might be helpful to think for a moment about the ways God can be considered father-like: We believe our life comes from God; God cares for us like a parent; God disciplines and loves us alike. Now think about the ways God is not like a father: God does not have a physical body and is not biologically male; some people have terrible fathers who would not enable them to think positively about God; God does not fall short the way even the best fathers do; God does not die after seventy or eighty years. In addition, the way Aramaic speakers in first-century Palestine would have understood *Abba* no doubt differs considerably from our

twenty-first-century usage in English of *father*. So, if the only way we refer to God is as a father, we are severely restricting our understanding of who God is and how God relates to the world.

The use of metaphor—saying one thing to speak of another thing—is actually the only means we have to speak of God. We cannot describe God directly because God is Spirit, not a physical person. We can describe a table, an animal, a boat on a lake, a moonlit night, or another person using direct descriptors, but this simply is not the case for the divine. We find a multitude of metaphors in the scriptures, as the biblical writers and Jesus attempt to explain, honor, and name God. If we turn to Psalm 62, we encounter a good example of an abundance of metaphors in one short text. Read carefully through verses 5-9 of the psalm and see how many metaphors you can identify.

For God alone my soul waits in silence,
 for my hope is from him.
 He alone is my rock and my salvation,
 my fortress; I shall not be shaken.
 On God rests my deliverance and my honor;
 my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.

Trust in him at all times, O people;
 pour out your heart before him;
 God is a refuge for us. *Selah*

Those of low estate are but a breath,
 those of high estate are a delusion;
 in the balances they go up;
 they are together lighter than a breath.

What are some of the metaphors for God in these verses? If you pointed to “fortress,” “rock,” and “refuge,” you would be right. Sometimes a

perceptive student will point to the word “he” for God and suggest that, too, is metaphorical since God is neither male nor female. But there are other metaphors at work in this psalm. The phrase “pour out your heart” is not to be taken literally! The reference to people of “low estate” being a “breath,” and all of them going “up” in the “balances” is also metaphorical. These are all examples of the way the scriptures and the life of faith are rich with metaphorical language.

Think, too, of the various metaphors and parables that Jesus used to describe God and the life of faith. In Matthew 13, we are told that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, yeast, treasure hidden in a field, one pearl of great value, and a net that caught fish of every kind. In John 10, Jesus uses metaphors to explain who he is: “I am the gate” (v. 7) and “I am the good shepherd” (v. 11). Very often these metaphors become so ingrained in our language over time that we no longer recognize them as metaphors. We think of Jesus as literally the “good shepherd,” but he was the son of a carpenter, not a shepherd. In Jesus’ time, many of the parables and metaphors were shocking to the hearers because they were not commonly used. The language was intended to shake the people out of their complacency or comfort zones and to make them think again about their faith. Thus, it is important for us to remind ourselves that the language of faith and our speech about God is and remains metaphorical.

In fact, even when we speak of characteristics of God such as justice or goodness, we can do so only by analogy. That is, we think of God’s justice or goodness in terms of examples of human justice or goodness. Yet God’s character is not to be conceived of as somehow quantitatively more of that human quality, but rather, as qualitatively different. God does not simply possess more of the human quality; God’s justice or love is by nature different from what we express. It is like the difference between a drawing of a flower and an actual flower. We can know something of God’s nature by analogy, but upon reflection, we also realize that God, by nature, differs

considerably from human beings and human characteristics. All of this is to say that we need to observe some caution in our language about God and to allow ourselves a certain sense of humility at our inability to name and describe God fully. We need to maintain a sense of awe that we possess any ability to speak of and know the divine in some measure, for it is only by God's gracious self-disclosure that we can begin to describe God.

Many seminaries today have policies related to the use of language in classes and written work. Usually, these policies point to one or two approaches: gender-neutral language and inclusive language. When we use gender-neutral language, we seek to avoid ascribing particular biological characteristics to God. In other words, we do not speak of God as he or him, she or her. Rather than saying, "God is good. He is the creator of all things," we would speak in neutral terms: "God is good. God is the creator of all things." Have you noticed that in this book we have used gender-neutral language for God? Usually, if done with some care, no one even notices the absence of gendered terms. With practice, you will find that referring to God in neutral terms can become second nature. Another preferred gender-neutral term relates to human beings. Rather than speaking of "man" or "mankind" as a term for all people, we use gender-neutral language such as "humanity" or "human beings."

Inclusive language is similar to gender-neutral language in its intention, but tends to suggest a balance in our metaphors for God and people. In some instances, rather than using neutral language, people will say something like: "Father God, Mother of us all." Some people find this reference to God as Mother to be shocking. But once we become aware that all language about God is metaphorical, we can see that, in some ways, God is indeed like a mother. In speaking of human beings, inclusive language would offer phrases such as "men and women" or alternate the pronouns: "Sometimes a person is attuned to God. His spirit is open. Her heart is yearning." When we use

inclusive language and gender-neutral language, we aid our pursuit of deliberative theology by carefully reflecting on the fullness of God and the created world. To simply suggest that *man* means “men and women” is a weak argument, demonstrating an embedded theology. If we wish to journey deeper into the reality that is God, we need to stretch beyond the narrow confines of our human pride and routine, and honor the power of words to both heal and hurt, reveal and conceal, open and limit us to the divine.

In the book of Exodus, we find a thought-provoking story about Moses and his calling to liberate the people of Israel from the oppression of Egypt. Moses is tending a flock of sheep, minding his own business, when he notices a bush, burning but not consumed by the flames, and he turns aside to see it more closely. There he encounters the living God, who announces that Moses is to go to Egypt and free the captives. Moses asks, “Who shall I tell them sent me?” He wants to know God’s name. Among the pagan cultures of the ancient world, to know a name was to exercise some measure of control over that god. But the answer is ambiguous: *ehyeh asher ehyeh*, which we translate as “I will be who I will be” or “I am who I am” (3:14). It is a pivotal moment that reminds us we do not have an easy way to name or describe this one true God, since the fullness of God always exceeds our human capacity for expression. We human beings want to get a handle on God, to nail God down, but of course, we tried that once and God rose again to life—a reality that exceeds our comprehension. We cannot control God. We may try to limit our language in order to make God easier to handle or to adhere to a church culture’s expectations, but we are limiting only ourselves and not God.

Rather than framing our use of language as gender-neutral or inclusive, I often prefer to speak in terms of “expansive” language. Expansive language suggests that we can never express the fullness of God, but when we expand our vocabulary and images of God, we continue to push against the limits we finite creatures tend to place

on who God is. We admit and continually wrestle with our human finitude and our tendency to mistakenly think we can craft God in our own image. In using expansive language, we do not eliminate the use of “father” as an image for God or simply balance “father” with “mother,” but we constantly seek to find new ways to name God and vary our descriptors. For example, in our prayers we might use any of the following: Gracious God, Merciful God, Alpha and Omega, Holy One, Triune God, Creator of All, Eternal Love, and so forth. We could even become more poetic, using metaphors such as: O God our Fortress, Rock of our Salvation, or Great Physician of our Soul. The point is that we should be intentional about varying the ways we name God. I know of one pastor who goes so far as to argue that when we rely exclusively on “Father” language to name God, we are actually lazy and self-centered, falling short of respecting the magnificence and vastness of God. Whether or not you agree with that assessment, our ministry with others will be more effective when we allow ourselves and others to encounter God anew in the varieties of human language, just as Jesus did.

When I teach students about the shock value of Jesus’ own metaphors and how his hearers would have experienced them as strange rather than comforting and common, I sometimes offer my own shocking metaphors to name God. One of my favorites is: “God is a greased pig.” You may be quite uncomfortable with this image. Is it respectful and appropriate to say this about God? Of course, God is not literally a greased pig, any more than God is literally a father or a rock. But it does tell us something about how we know God. We human beings chase after God, try to contain God, and just when we think we have gotten our arms firmly around the divine, God slips away again, and we find ourselves face down in the muck, having to renew our attempt to grasp and understand God. Thus, in some ways, God is like a greased pig. Of course, we need to be thoughtful in our use of unusual language. I would not use this particular phrase on

Easter or in a funeral sermon. But during ordinary time of the church year, it might wake up and shake up the faithful. Whatever images you choose to speak of God and the life of faith, remember that our theological language will always fall short of the fullness of God. Those are the limits we face as finite creatures. Our task is to recognize and push back against our inclination to control God and make God fit into our small and particular lives, to make God according to our own image and likeness, to mold God in a way that conforms comfortably to our congregation's image of God. But the more expansive our language, the less likely we are to fall into the trap of making God into our image, rather than continually and intentionally seeking to know who God is in all God's mystery.

■ THEOLOGICAL METHOD: CRITERIA, NORM, AND SOURCES

Our discussion of theological language leads us now into a survey of theological method. Method, of course, is a process or procedure for doing some task or another, the steps we take, and the tools we use. As noted at the outset of this chapter, whether you realize it or not, every sermon you preach has a method (though some are good methods—such as careful exegesis and questioning your assumptions—and others are not). As we begin to explore theological method, the first point of concern is the criteria we use to evaluate our theology and the norm for this evaluation. While there is no one “correct” theology, since we all see in a mirror dimly, neither do we accept a position of relativism or the idea that “anything goes.” John Wesley differentiated between the “essentials” of the faith that we hold in common (sinfulness preveniently graced, justification by faith, and sanctification) and the “opinions” that allow for different expressions.

In other words, being faithful to God requires us to make some judgments with a sense of humility and openness that allows our

minds and hearts to be changed over time, rather than simply rejecting proposals that do not match our current set of beliefs. Faithfulness to God is a journey of discovery in which we are carried along within the swirling currents of a river; it is not a steel platform upon which we stand with feet firmly planted and arms crossed, protecting the truth as we know it. Nevertheless, we must always “test the spirits” and seek to discern the adequacy of theological proposals, including our own.

Suppose someone creates a theology in which they hold the words of Benjamin Franklin or Luke Skywalker as central to their understanding of God. Or suppose a United Methodist’s primary theological resource is written by Joel Osteen or Rick Warren. Upon what basis might we evaluate such theological proposals? Would the former be *Christian* theology? Would the latter be sound *United Methodist* theology? The criteria we hold—our rules or principles for judgment that form the basis for our evaluation—help us to discern the faithfulness of a theological statement. Keep in mind, of course, that it may not be an “all or nothing” evaluation, in that a theological statement may contain both claims about God and the life of faith that ring true and statements that we might question. Sometimes we refer to this as a hermeneutics of appreciation and critique, in which we interpret the author’s statement with an eye toward what is valuable and an eye toward what might not speak faithfully about God or represent well the United Methodist doctrinal standards and, thus, needs to be revised or reconsidered.

Before we consider some criteria that might be useful in evaluating theological proposals, you might have noticed that we are now raising questions about truth claims and the truthfulness of our reflection upon God and the life of faith. These are questions of *epistemology*, which is the study of knowledge or how we know what we know and how we know what is true. Epistemology is at the heart of Pontius Pilate’s question in John 18:38, when he asks, “What is

truth?" It is one of the fundamental questions of human beings and one that Christians (and others) have asked of Jesus Christ, the church, and theologians down through the centuries. Truth claims are at the heart of pastoral ministry.

This search for what is true also raises questions for us about the authority to make such judgments. Who gets to decide what is true? As we noted in chapter 2, in some traditions, authority is hierarchical. For example, in Roman Catholicism, the judgments of the pope have distinct authority over all other theological statements. For most Protestants, United Methodists included, this authority is far more diffuse and democratic, which allows us to discern together the truthfulness of Christian witness, but also leads to pronounced disputes among the faithful. Authority to decide, in either case, is seldom located in just one person (though non-denominational churches may be the exception at times). Thus, when we refer to *authority*, we are pointing to a certain power or sanctioning to decide, to enforce laws or rules, to judge what is acceptable and what is not. Of course, the notion of authority is also contextually situated. For example, a police officer has the authority within her jurisdiction to arrest someone who violates the law, but she does not have that authority in another country. She does not have the authority to enforce the policies of a private company or a denomination. The United Methodist *Book of Discipline*, for example, has no authority in a Presbyterian church. In fact, some aspects of the *Book of Discipline* have no authority in central conferences within The United Methodist Church. Thus, authority needs to be understood within the particular contexts in which we live and act, and this is also true of the Christian faith.

With the rise of reason during the Enlightenment and the notion of the autonomous individual, the question of authority came under intense scrutiny. Previously, authorities were largely unchallenged, and what a given authority said was essentially the final word. Remember too, that for generations the vast majority of people could not read

for themselves, even if writings had been widely available, which they were not. But as people became aware of the exercise of reason and as democratic movements began to take hold in France, the United States, and elsewhere, traditional authorities were questioned, and their absolute power was eroded. This questioning of who has the authority to decide continues right down to the present day. Some persons today will go so far as to suggest that the only authority is that of each individual person and his or her understanding. But for Christians who believe that we are not simply autonomous individuals but part of a larger community of faith, the body of Christ, we seek a more moderate position that lies between absolutism, in which an external authority decides for us, and relativism, in which only our own individual preferences matter. Neither extreme is a healthy position for people of faith. As pastors, we are called to find a middle ground to cultivate a healthy congregation. If we accept a position of absolutism, then we elevate the institution or another person to God-like status. Whenever church members view the pastor as the ultimate authority, we are not cultivating thoughtful, reflective disciples; we are developing an embedded theology. But if our church members are unyielding in their own convictions as the only authority by which they will live their lives, then we have not helped them to grasp the importance of living in a community in which we submit to Christ's way in relationship to others. Our goal is to develop a certain give-and-take in the search for truth, and this demands a measure of humility to recognize sometimes we might be wrong in our judgments or positions and that, together, we can come to a more faithful understanding of our lives in God.

THEOLOGICAL CRITERIA

We have to be careful, then, not to suggest that any and all Christian witness is faithful witness. We steer a path between our theology or

witness being completely and rigidly fixed and its being completely open and unmoored. To do so, we rely on certain criteria to help us assess whether or not a theological proposal is faithful witness (even if we do not personally agree with that claim, it may be valid according to the criteria). There is no one set of criteria that is agreed upon by all theologians, though they tend to point in the same direction. For example, Daniel Migliore defines *theology* in the classical sense of *fides quaerens intellectum* or “faith seeking understanding,” from which he claims that theology is Christian faith “in the mode of asking questions and struggling to find at least provisional answers to these questions.”¹ He then offers four criteria for evaluating theology and the ensuing “proclamation and practice of the community of faith”; to paraphrase: 1) Is it true to the revelation of God in Christ in the scriptures? 2) Is it an adequate expression of the whole revelation in Jesus Christ? 3) Does it represent God as a living reality in the present context? 4) Does it lead to personal and social transformation?² We might encapsulate these criteria by indicating that theology should be true, coherent, fitting, and transformative. In United Methodist preaching and teaching, we would add a criterion to ask if a particular theological claim is consistent with our doctrinal standards. If not, we would need to explain that to our church.

Schubert Ogden, by contrast, offers two basic criteria for adjudicating the adequacy of theological proposals: appropriateness and credibility. By *appropriate*, Ogden means that it “represents the same understanding of faith as is expressed in the . . . normative Christian witness.”³ Ogden thus suggests that theology must be faithful to the stream of witnesses, including scripture and tradition, which have expressed the Christian faith and been deemed valid by the community

1 Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 3.

2 *Ibid.*, 11–15.

3 Schubert Ogden, “What Is Theology?” in *On Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 4.

of believers. The criterion of *credibility* means “it meets the relevant conditions of truth universally established with human existence.”⁴ Is it fitting to our human situation, to our lives in the world today and in each generation? Notice that, unlike Migliore, Ogden is not concerned with transformation, though we might see his criteria as including truth, coherence, and fittingness. Again, United Methodists would also want to ask whether the theological claim is consistent with United Methodist teachings before offering it to the congregation.

Some liberation theologians, such as James Cone and Elizabeth Johnson, add a specific criterion suggesting theology must be liberating or emancipating to the marginalized and oppressed. This criterion aligns, at least in part, with Migliore’s concern for transformation. For liberation theologians, if a theological proposal reinforces unjust structural arrangements that benefit the powerful at the expense of the underprivileged, this criterion would lead them to reject its adequacy in light of the scriptural witnesses. There are, of course, other ways of configuring and articulating criteria for assessing the validity of theological proposals. It might be helpful for you to pause and think about what you find most important for assessing any theological position. When you read a theological position or doctrinal statement, on what basis will you assess its authenticity or validity for the life of faith?

Of course, as we noted above, we should also recognize that United Methodists have a particular criterion for assessing the adequacy of a theological position or Christian practice: Is it consistent with United Methodist doctrinal standards? For instance, the Christian Church, Disciples of Christ maintains that believer’s baptism is the only valid practice for their churches. United Methodists, however, uphold infant baptism as the normative practice within our congregations. United Methodist pastors are expected to encourage infant

4 Ibid., 5.

baptism, as consistent with our understanding of God's prevenient grace, which always precedes our understanding of God's love for us. These are particular theological positions with specific criteria that are central to the tradition's identity and witness to Jesus Christ. In my own journey, before I began my seminary studies, I actually read the theological writings of John Wesley to make sure that I agreed with those positions and could uphold the denomination's criteria for belief and practice in my ministry. As a result, I found myself more deeply committed to and excited about pursuing ministry within The United Methodist Church. Even today, Wesley's theology forms the heart of how I understand and practice my faith in Jesus Christ.

THEOLOGICAL NORM

Given this sense of finding a middle ground between resisting any change in our theology and being so open that we are drawn to any new idea, it might feel as if there is no common ground upon which Christian witness can be based. You might wonder if there is some core truth or truths that constitute our Christian faith. Despite the varieties of Christian theology and practice arising from theological reflection, most Christians unite around the norm for doing theology. The norm is the measuring stick or standard by which we can assess the adequacy of our theological proposals and even the adequacy of our criteria. As Christians, we generally point to Jesus Christ: the witnesses to the life and ministry, the birth, death, and resurrection of this one as the norm for doing theology. He is, according to scripture, the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). This is our yardstick because, in Jesus Christ, we have the fullest revelation or self-disclosure of who God is (fully divine) and who we human beings are created to be (fully human). In Jesus Christ, we find the fullest revelation of God, but not the final or complete knowledge of God, since it is impossible for the infinite to be fully revealed to the finite. Of course, our access to Jesus Christ is through

the biblical witnesses, and since the Gospels provide particular insights into Jesus Christ, we sometimes say that there is a “canon within the canon,” in that the Gospels hold a privileged position in their witness to Jesus Christ. While we will have more to say about scripture as a source, scripture as a whole is sometimes referred to as the *norma normans non normata* (the norm that norms but is not normed). It is akin to saying *sola scriptura*, in that when we want to justify our theological proposals, the revelation in Jesus Christ as attested to in the biblical writings becomes our final measuring stick for adequacy.

The norm for theology leads us directly into a discussion of the usual sources we draw upon for constructing or assessing theology, as the norm is derived from and supported by these sources, and they serve as our tools for faithful reflection. The common sources are scripture, tradition, reason, and experience; and scripture is generally deemed to hold the primary place among them for Protestants, United Methodists included. You might recognize these sources as our “Wesleyan Quadrilateral”—a point to which we will return later in this chapter.

Remember that in our historical overview of the development of doctrine, we saw that the earliest theologians drew upon scripture, and these Patristic theologians’ writings then became authoritative in the Medieval Period, thus inaugurating tradition as an important source for theology. The Scholastics then brought reason to the forefront in doing theology. Soon the Reformation emphasis on *sola scriptura* would push back against the privileging of both tradition and reason in doing theology and re-emphasize the biblical witnesses (though, in actuality, theology has never been strictly based on scripture). Finally, in the early Modern Period, we noted the rise of experience as an important source for theology, though exactly what was meant by experience varied. Also, the Modern Period began to emphasize reason and scientific proof. Today, theologians generally engage all four of these sources to one degree or another. We will consider each of

these sources in turn, as well as provide a brief introduction to some sources for theology that have been introduced in recent years.

SOURCE: SCRIPTURE

We have already considered the Reformation's emphasis on *sola scriptura*. This principle indicates that Protestants generally view scripture as the primary source for our Christian theology, doctrine, and practice. Our brief discussion here will focus on the notion of inspiration, the authority of scripture, and principles of hermeneutics (interpretation). We will also give attention to John Wesley's and United Methodism's view of scripture.

Inspiration

The primacy of the scriptures is often related to the concept of "inspiration" or the idea that the biblical texts have been created under the influence, guidance, or direction of the Holy Spirit. They are inspired or God-breathed. Most mainline Protestants, United Methodists included, reject a notion of inspiration that views it as a supernatural process in which God dictated directly to the biblical scribe who was merely a mechanical recorder, thus rendering the texts infallible and inerrant. When we read the scriptures carefully, we notice contradictions and historical realities shaping various texts. Thus, we tend to understand inspiration in a more measured sense of the Holy Spirit working in and through human beings who are limited and historically and socially located. This does not reduce the sense of scripture as God's Word, but suggests—in good Wesleyan fashion—that God's grace is received through a human response. The Holy Spirit is at work in the readers, proclaimers, interpreters, and hearers down through the centuries so that the words of scripture continue to convey spiritual truths or God's Word. Thus, when we claim the scriptures are inspired by God, we affirm that they have a unique character, a relationship to the divine, and contain the guidance and knowledge that is necessary

for our salvation. These are sacred texts, and our theology recognizes the central role they play in defining Christian beliefs and practices.

Authority

Although we have already discussed the notion of authority at some length and indicated the difficulties associated with this concept, the authority of scripture deserves our consideration, given the primacy of the biblical texts for the Christian faith. The early Christian church that arose following the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus relied on the authority of their scriptures, which we know today as the Old Testament or the Hebrew Scriptures. The origins of the church were not a break from the past, but a reinterpretation of it. These early Christians also viewed the testimony of the apostles who were eyewitnesses to Jesus as authoritative to this new way of being God's people, but primarily because they pointed directly to the authority of Jesus as the Messiah, as the one they proclaimed as Lord and as the Word incarnate. We might say that Jesus, himself, was and is the reinterpretation of and continuity with God's salvation history. When the canon of scripture was formed—and the testimony of the eyewitnesses became part of the New Testament writings—these authorities were communally affirmed. Later Christian writings were also affirmed as authentic witnesses to the way of Jesus Christ, even if their authors had not been present with Jesus in the flesh. At the same time, we should recognize that Christians have also believed in the authority of scripture as a result of the Holy Spirit testifying to the faithful about the sacred nature of this Word. Thus, not only does the human community affirm this authority, but God acts to attest to it in the lives of believers in each and every generation.

Daniel Migliore's discussion of inadequate approaches to the question of biblical authority is helpful in guiding our understanding.⁵

5 Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 47–50.

Notice here that sometimes our theological inquiry is aided by attending to what something is not (in relation to our understanding of God, we would call this method of inquiry the *via negativa*). Migliore argues, first, against the “biblicist view” of plenary inspiration, in which the authority is located strictly in the supernatural character of the words that are thought to correspond exactly to God’s words. Again, this points to the idea of the human writer as little more than a scribe in the hands of the Holy Spirit. But this viewpoint tends to elevate the words of the Bible to a position of ultimacy, rather than holding the Word or the living and active God as the ultimate and final authority. Even the Bible can become an idol or idolatrous if we place it above God or consider it identical to God. This biblicist view of authority also neglects to recognize the cultured and contextual elements of the scriptures in different historical eras and settings or ignores some texts while fiercely upholding and privileging others that better support an interpreter’s theological positions.

The second error in approaches to biblical authority is one that arose in the Modern Era: the view that the Bible is an historical document. In this case, the Bible is treated as an artifact in which the task of reconstructing the facts—the history, linguistics, culture, and archaeological evidence—of the texts is of primary or sole importance. Of course, the historical-critical method has been an important tool in deepening our understanding of biblical texts and aiding our interpretation, but most Christians consider the Bible to be a living witness that extends beyond the past into our lives today. We might say that the historical realities of the scriptures are insightful and contribute significantly to our understanding, but do not comprise the fullness of the scriptural message of salvation by faith. A third misguided approach is similar in nature, as it treats the Bible as ancient literature, worthy of study in a literature course. The error here, no doubt, is that for communities of faith these are not just stories about characters, but living witnesses to the reality of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy

Spirit at work in the world, and this reality has a transformative power in the lives of people today.

Finally, Migliore touches on a tendency that arises in Modernity, which is the attempt to view scriptural authority as an individualistic and private matter associated with personal devotion. While personal devotion is an important part of our lives in God, the Christian faith, by its very nature, is communal, and the biblical witnesses testify to the corporate nature of our faith. To be in Christ is to turn away from self-centered existence and to be incorporated into the community of believers. The Word comes alive where two or three are gathered, and it sends Christians into the world as bearers of this witness. Of course, at times we all read (or should read) the Bible devotionally, as guidance and encouragement for our own lives. But the scriptures are not intended to be simply a private and personal source of inspiration, and their authenticity lies in the communal accountability from generation to generation.

Migliore's identification of missteps in locating the nature of scriptural authority helps us to focus on how to more adequately understand biblical authority for our lives as Christians in the twenty-first century. This authority is found in the communal nature of the scriptures and in the full sweep of the witnesses to God's salvation history that culminates in Jesus of Nazareth who is the Christ. Because Jesus Christ is the norm, and the scriptures are *norma normans non normata*, they authorize our theological proposals, what we believe and how we practice our faith. We can and must draw upon these witnesses to God and the life of faith. But no passage or verse or book of the Bible provides singular authority. Instead, authority is found by considering each passage in the context of the whole message of salvation history—how God is at work for our redemption and reconciliation before, in, and through Jesus Christ in both the Old and New Testaments. Of course, even as we recognize this authoritative status,

the very nature of scripture leads us to the concern for hermeneutics or the interpretation of scripture.

Hermeneutics or Interpretation

The interpretation of scripture is a fact of our human existence and finitude, though some people argue that the Bible can and should be read literally. Imagine, for a moment, that you are living in the Middle Ages. You know nothing of the Enlightenment or the modern mind-set. Electronics and wireless communications do not exist; in fact, there isn't electricity or running water. Zippers have yet to be invented. The middle class has yet to emerge. There are no antibiotics or immunizations. There are no public libraries or bookstores, no newspapers we can purchase on the street corner. No pizza, hamburgers, or ice cream cones exist. We don't each have a Bible or two or three lying around the house. We believe that the earth is the center of the universe. It's hard to imagine what life would be like in the twelfth century, and harder still to grasp how human beings understood and made sense of their lives and world. There can be little doubt that each generation necessarily understands the biblical witnesses in the light of their own horizon, in the midst of their own social, political, cultural, and intellectual milieu.

Yet the Bible has been and remains central to the way we understand and live our Christian lives in the world and in each distinctive era of human history. Despite the vast differences in the way human beings live from generation to generation, the scriptures continue to convey to us the reality of God. The timelessness of the Word of God is always spoken and heard anew in each generation. Thus we recognize that we bring a certain "lens" to our reading and understanding of the biblical texts, just as Jesus of Nazareth did in the midst of ancient Palestine. In fact, we might claim that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us as a model and reminder that the Word becomes incarnate, takes on flesh, in each generation and cultural expression of

human life. The Word remains relevant and meaningful, not trapped in the human history and cultures of the past. This process of interpretation should be viewed, not as something negative or unfortunate, but rather as an expression of how God meets us in the particulars of the world across time and space. We will have more to say about the importance of context later in this chapter, but for now, our goal is to recognize that scripture is necessarily interpreted whenever we human beings read it. There is no human being who reads devoid of certain frames of reference and presuppositions. There was no biblical author who was free of such frames of reference and presuppositions.

Remember too, that we previously considered how theologians from the earliest days of the church, such as Origen and Augustine, began to articulate different levels of meaning at work in the scriptures, though no consensus emerged on the right way to read the texts. This practice of discerning the various meanings continued to shape the use of the Bible as a source for theology throughout Christian history without arriving at the one, correct interpretative method. In the Medieval Era, Thomas Aquinas articulated four levels (“senses”) of meaning in the scriptures: the literal plus a threefold spiritual sense of allegorical (the Old Testament allegorically referencing the New Testament and in cases where the literal meaning is cloudy), moral or tropological (how Christians should act), and anagogical (referencing the hope beyond this world). Not all passages would necessarily contain all senses of scripture, but these different meanings were deemed to be at work within the Bible. To excavate any meaning is to enter into interpretation.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, a feminist scholar of biblical interpretation and theology, provides us with a contemporary example of the ongoing work of interpreting scripture. She offers a critical feminist biblical interpretation aimed at liberation, which consists of four “key moments” that include: 1) a hermeneutics of suspicion (scrutinizing presuppositions); 2) historical remembrance and reconstruction

(sociopolitical and historical analysis); 3) proclamation or ethical and theological evaluation (assessing liberatory and oppressive trajectories); and 4) creative imagination and ritualization (retelling and reliving).⁶ For Schüssler Fiorenza, this “model of feminist biblical interpretation . . . challenges other modes of biblical reading to become more comprehensive and sophisticated.”⁷ Ultimately, the interpretative process she describes is aimed at the transformation of both church and society for the sake of the flourishing of all persons. While this view of hermeneutics may stretch your understanding and even unsettle you a bit, each new generation of interpreters has challenged, stretched, and unsettled the last one across the centuries. Interpretation is a never-ending reality when we engage the scriptural witnesses. Every pastor and every person who picks up the Bible should have a clear sense that they, too, are entering into a process of interpretation of the scriptures.

But if interpretation is always occurring, and if we all bring particular lenses to our reading of the Bible, how do we avoid misleading or unfaithful interpretations of scripture? The first thing to be said is that unfaithful interpretations abound. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul railed against the interpreters, “super-apostles,” whose message was inconsistent with the teachings of Jesus (11:4-5). In our own day, countless examples of the “prosperity gospel” can be found in churches large and small, teaching that a person’s belief in God will lead him or her to be healthy, wealthy, and wise (which, of course, is the gospel according to Benjamin Franklin, not Jesus Christ). Clearly, we need some principles to enable the truthfulness and faithfulness of our interpretations of scripture, including what is proclaimed from the pulpit and taught in Sunday school.

6 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Bible, the Global Context, and the Discipleship of Equals,” in *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, eds. Rebecca S. Chopp and Mark Lewis Taylor (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 90–91.

7 *Ibid.*, 91.

The principles or guidance for evaluating interpretations may vary, but tend to include several basic considerations. First, given the theological norm derived from the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, interpretations of scripture should be consistent with the overall message of salvation history and the mission of God in the world. In other words, there is an overarching sense conveyed by scripture, and any interpretation should be consistent with that message, particularly in the witnesses to Jesus Christ. If we interpret a particular verse or text apart from the broader meaning of the scriptures and what Jesus Christ has revealed, then our interpretation might well be off track. If we resort to “prooftexting”—choosing individual texts to support our position—we may be taking those passages out of context to suit our own purposes.

Second, we should take seriously the historical-critical method of biblical study by which we examine the context of the time, place, and circumstances in which the biblical author wrote. We learn a great deal about what the passage is saying when we know what it meant to the original writers and hearers. We can begin to discern the human elements that are inevitably present in any text, as well as to highlight the movement of God in history so that our focus is on God’s salvific work. Studying the original context of a text enables us to interpret it responsibly within our own horizon, in terms that make sense today but are faithful to the witnesses of the past. For example, while we no longer use a denarius as a form of payment, by examining the original context we can suggest what a denarius might be worth today. But will we make that comparison based upon a typical day’s wages or upon its worth in the price of silver today? Should we assume a typical laborer’s wages in the contemporary United States’ context would approximate those in the ancient world? As you can see, even the historical-critical method requires us to make hermeneutical moves.

Third, because the Bible is the church’s book, a communal document, interpretations should be accountable to the larger community

of faith. Of course, seldom will an interpretation be deemed valid by all Christians, since we also interpret through our own lenses, even though some will claim to be unbiased readers. But keep in mind that the way an African villager reads a text may draw on metaphors largely incomprehensible to Christians in Stockholm. A farmer in rural Nebraska may relate well to Jesus' agricultural metaphors and expand upon the notion of a mustard seed or one lost sheep among a flock. But in the middle of New York City or Buenos Aires, the agricultural metaphors may not be the most appropriate and relevant way to convey the message of the gospel; instead, metaphors that convey the message to city dwellers will need to be found. Thus, different communities of faith will inevitably allow the scriptural interpretation to translate into the lives of the hearers in all their particularity. It does not affirm every individual interpretation as valid; it continues to depend upon the discernment of the larger community of faith that the contemporary witness is faithful to the biblical message.

The significance of scripture for Protestants, its inspiration, authority, and interpretative nature all point toward the basic theological concept of scripture as the Word of God. Not all the words of scripture should be equated directly with the Word of God, which we might consider a manifestation of the nature and will of God, the revelation of the divine reality. When we use scripture as a source for theology it is not the words of the scripture that carry the weight, but the Word as God's presence, revelation, and guidance for our life together as people of faith.

United Methodist Views of Scriptural Authority

John Wesley viewed scriptural authority through an eighteenth-century Anglican lens. He and his Methodists understood that the authority of scripture lay in its conveyance of what we need to know for our salvation (see Article V of the Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church). This position stood in contrast to that of certain Christians

of his England, “the Dissenters, like their Puritan forebears, [who] insisted that Scripture is *the* authority for *everything*.”⁸ The salvific function of scripture is central to Wesley’s understanding. As a man of one book, *homo unius libri*, he did not imply he read nothing but the Bible; rather, that the Bible was the lens through which he understood everything else and its relationship to Christian faith. As Maddox suggests, “Wesley consistently identified the Bible as the most basic authority for determining Christian belief and practice.”⁹ The scriptural witnesses held the primary authority for his theological proposals, and his sermons and writings are replete with scriptural references. Wesley also emphasized the “analogy of faith,” by which he meant the overall message of the scriptures: sin, justification by faith, sanctification, and salvation. Wesley understood that bringing out the meaning of texts was necessary, but that any passage of scripture should be read in light of this sense of the whole biblical message.

Today’s United Methodists continue in the vein of Wesley, placing scripture as the primary, but not sole, source for our beliefs and practice, as providing for that which is necessary for our salvation. Alongside the Articles of Religion inherited from Wesley, the Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church—part of United Methodist doctrinal standards found in the *Book of Discipline*—reiterates this point in Article IV: “We believe the Holy Bible, Old and New Testaments, reveals the Word of God so far as it is necessary for our salvation. It is to be received through the Holy Spirit as the true rule and guide for faith and practice. Whatever is not revealed in or established by the Holy Scriptures is not to be made an article of faith nor is it to be taught as essential to salvation.” In the section of the *Book of Discipline* entitled, “Theological Guidelines: Sources and Criteria,”

8 W. Stephen Gunter, “The Quadrilateral and the ‘Middle Way,’” in Campbell et al., *Wesley and the Quadrilateral* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 17.

9 Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 36.

the statement on Scripture reiterates our belief that “Scripture is the primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine.” As with Wesley, we are to “read Scripture within the believing community, informed by the tradition of that community,” and we “interpret individual texts in light of their place in the Bible as a whole.” As United Methodists we hold that Scripture is our primary source for theological reflection, but to fully grasp its meaning we must also engage tradition, reason, and experience.

SOURCE: TRADITION

The second source for doing theology is *tradition*, a word that comes from the Latin *tradere* or “to hand down.” For Christians, it represents the “handing down” of the beliefs and practices that the church holds to be authoritative and faithful to the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Another way of describing tradition is to say that those things Christians have held dear and claimed to be true continue to serve as companions for the faith journey in subsequent generations. These beliefs and practices help to shape our identity as Christians. But by now, you should be attuned to the streams of Christian theology that have emerged over the centuries and might well ask the question: Which identity? Which church? Which community or communities of Christians is the “tradition”? The answer, as you might expect, depends upon where you stand. For United Methodists, our tradition as a source for theology is not identical to the tradition of Catholics, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Disciples of Christ, or Baptists.

As we have seen, tradition emerged initially as a source in the Medieval Era, when Christian theologians reiterated and even organized the teachings of the Patristic writers. But the tension between privileging tradition or scripture came to the forefront during the Reformation, as the Reformers questioned the validity of some of the teachings and practices of the Catholic tradition. Moreover, the Reformation marks

a distinct branching off of the tradition from Roman Catholicism. In other words, tradition is not a single, static deposit of teachings that all Christians hold in common. In Protestant churches, the stream of the tradition leading up to the Reformation is not rejected but finds voice and expression in the theology of Luther, Calvin, Wesley, and others.

Thus, there is no “one” Christian tradition that we all hold in common, but multiple traditions. For example, in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, John Wesley’s theology forms part of the tradition, but its founder, Richard Allen, would represent a divergence from the United Methodist tradition. For a Presbyterian, Calvin’s *Institutes* would be considered part of the tradition, but not for United Methodists. For the Christian Church, Disciples of Christ, the tradition would include the Stone-Campbell Movement, but not so for American Baptists, who would include Roger Williams and John Clarke, and neither of these streams are considered part of the United Methodist tradition. For each contemporary denominational expression, there are fundamental documents and voices that shape how they understand their own tradition and what should be used as a source. Our Christian identity is shaped by the tradition in which we are located. We may all follow the one Christ, but we express our lives in Christ in a variety of ways that continue to be handed down from generation to generation.

For John Wesley, both the Catholic tradition from which the Church of England emerged and various teachings of the Protestant Reformation were part of the Methodist movement. At the risk of oversimplification, Wesley valued the early church, and considered it “as being purest when it was nearest its apostolic roots.”¹⁰ He also looked to the Church of England as expressed in its foundational documents of the Elizabethan settlement. We should remember that

10 Ted A. Campbell, “The Interpretive Role of Tradition,” in Campbell et al., *Wesley and the Quadrilateral*, 69–75.

Wesley saw scripture as primary, but engaged tradition as a lens to help interpret the scriptural witnesses. Of course, Wesley's own writings reinterpret the tradition handed down to him and provide today's United Methodists with a theological foundation that we regard as central to our identity as a Christian community. Added to Wesley's writings are additions to the Articles of Religion and the Evangelical United Brethren's Confession of Faith. The denominational history that leads to the establishment of The United Methodist Church in 1968 also expresses our tradition. At the same time, as the *Book of Discipline* suggests, we are also "challenged by traditions from around the world" that can "help us rediscover the biblical witness to God's special commitment to the poor, the disabled, the imprisoned, the oppressed, the outcast." As a result, a "critical appreciation of these traditions can compel us to think about God in new ways, enlarge our vision of shalom, and enhance our confidence in God's provident love" (see the section Theological Guidelines: Tradition, in the *Book of Discipline*). In other words, rather than dismissing other traditions outright, we should let them challenge us and help us to think more deeply about the God in Jesus Christ we worship and serve as the people called United Methodist. Traditions, our own and others, provide us with lenses to deepen our faithfulness to the scriptural witnesses and our Methodist heritage.

SOURCE: REASON

As theology evolved, the Scholastic theologians first brought reason to the forefront, then the Modern Era elevated reason as the highest of human capacities. Kant's book *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* is representative of the turn to reason that characterized the modern mind-set. There was an emerging sense that the rational mind, the capacity to think, was a sufficient basis for discovering knowledge of everything, including God, apart from revelation.

The modern emphasis on rationalism—this sense of the sufficiency of reason alone—should be distinguished from the human capacity to reason, which exists apart from arguments related to its purposes and ultimate goal. The exercise of reason as a source for theology has been both a positive force and, in the extreme as rationalism, an impediment or complication to the pursuit of theology.

When we consider that unquestioned and unchecked authority has often led to the oppression of others and social inequalities, the rise of reason marked an important shift in human understanding. Where once church and civil authorities could make decisions unilaterally, the rise of reason opened up a certain accountability to the masses and, more important, accountability to God. Just because a church leader or priest says something is of God, doesn't mean it is necessarily the case. The ability to reason and ask questions has proven over time to further the reign of God on earth as we critique and affirm teachings. In retrospect, we can reflect upon past Christian practices, such as the Crusades or the support of many churches for slavery, and recognize that these things were not God's will. Reason can be life giving in this sense. It is also clear that we have been given the gift of intellect to ponder the meaning of life and our faith. There is no thought we might think that is not known already to God; we need not fear asking questions about God and the life of faith. Indeed, in the Gospels, we find Jesus using logic and reason. For example, when he is asked about the paying of taxes, he responds, "'Show me a denarius. Whose head and whose title does it bear?' They said, 'The emperor's.' He said to them, 'Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's'" (Luke 20:24-25). Reason, as a gift from God, should be widely embraced by the faithful.

Limits to Reason

But of course there are also limits to reason. While the modern perspective elevated reason to the primary, indeed at times sole, source

of reliable knowledge and suggested its exercise could lead to the good society and human excellence, our experience over time has proven the sheer fallacy of that supposition. Weaponry has become increasingly more destructive. Drugs that target a disease create side effects that are equally debilitating. Food is plentiful in some nations, leading to high rates of obesity, while the populations of other nations are starving. We cannot reason our way to the perfect society; indeed, we may be more divided than ever on what the good society actually looks like. We cannot think our way to God, despite the claims of rationalists. The Modernist argument, from Ludwig Feuerbach, Sigmund Freud, and others—that God is merely a human projection of deep-seated desires, wishes, or fears—has not been proven true or widely accepted. Human beings continue to hold a widespread belief in God, even if they increasingly reject or disavow organized religion.

Theologians have long argued that, as a result of the “fall” from grace, our reason is corrupted, which means that unaided by grace we do not have clear and correct knowledge, especially of God. Yet, even as Christians believe there is a limit to the exercise of reason, it does not mean we deny scientific evidence. We need not place faith in opposition to reason, science, or fact. The theory of evolution or advances in genetics are not incompatible with Christian faith, as we believe that God has placed in motion physical laws and created an orderly, reliable universe. We experience our physical environment as orderly and reliable, so much so that we seldom reflect upon it. We do not awaken each morning wondering if there will be a sun or a sky. A surgeon does not have to wonder where in the body she will find the heart or liver. We know what a dog is or a cat because their characteristics remain remarkably stable even as breeds vary. We live in an orderly and organized universe.

Most theologians consider scientific evidence as an aid to deepen our theological understanding, whereas denying the knowledge obtained through science leads to theological proposals that lack

credibility in our contemporary society. Suppose we were to suggest, as Bishop Ussher did in the seventeenth century, that creation occurred in the year 4004 BCE. Today, we have scientific evidence obtained through radiometric dating of rocks and other archaeological techniques that falsify Ussher's chronology. How likely are non-believers to take seriously a theological claim that is disproven by scientific evidence? Were we to insist on Ussher's dating of the earth, we would appear silly to most non-believers, so much so they would be closed to the possibility of faith. Of course, there are some Christians today who still hold to that claim of creation in 4004 BCE, but without the exercise of reason—and the recognition that reason is a capacity given to us by God—Christian theology and faith lack credibility and intelligibility. Thus, theology utilizes logic, reason, and evidence to formulate proposals that are meaningful and true, but reason inevitably remains one tool among others, and it does not resolve all the mysteries of human existence or provide answers to the nature and will of God. As McGrath puts it, "A central theme of Christian theology down the ages has been that the human attempts to discern fully the nature and purposes of God are ultimately unsuccessful."¹¹ Christians understand there is a limit to our knowledge, particularly when God is the subject of our inquiry.

Revelation

Because reason as a source for theology has its limits, Christians have traditionally embraced the meaning and function of revelation in theology. *Revelation*, by definition, refers to the disclosure of something previously hidden, stemming from the Greek word *apokalypto*, to uncover or disclose. George Stroup helpfully distinguishes revelation's "objective" dimension, "*what* is revealed," from its "subjective"

11 Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 153.

dimension or “*how* revelation is received.”¹² In traditional theology, up through the seventeenth century, the objective side generally referred to either the Word of God as revealed in Jesus Christ or a particular teaching of scripture or the church. The subjective side was considered “some form of illumination. God illumines the mind so that it can see what it cannot see by means of reason alone.”¹³ Revelation requires both the objective (the “what”) and the subjective (the “how”) working together.

One further clarification about revelation should be offered, related to what we are calling the “subjective” side of revelation, or how we receive this knowledge of God. Often we distinguish between general revelation in which God is disclosed in nature and in the conscience of people and thus available to all, and special revelation whereby God is revealed in specific events in salvation history and above all, in the incarnation of Jesus. Special revelation is accessed by means of faith. In the case of Christian faith, revelation is God’s self-disclosure to humanity in the form of Jesus Christ and through the events of salvation history recorded in the biblical texts, though admittedly, the human reception of revelation is not without its difficulties. We might say that the revelation of God is filtered through our limited and sinful human lives, through our corrupt reason, which is why we are urged to “take on the mind of Christ.” Christianity thus claims its origin lies in God’s revelation, God’s free act of self-disclosure, rather than through human construction. In other words, our reason is able to take us only so far, and revelation provides us with knowledge that would otherwise remain unavailable to human beings.

But with the Enlightenment’s turn to reason and the growing critique of civil and church authorities, traditional notions of revelation

12 George Stroup, “Revelation,” in *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, newly updated edition, eds. Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 116.

13 Ibid., 116–17.

were challenged, and this process continued to shape theological understanding in the twentieth century. Various responses were proposed to respond intelligibly to such challenges, including the emphasis on moral and ethical grounds for Christian faith apart from the reliance on God found in classic liberalism. Karl Barth's neo-orthodoxy responded with a reemphasis on the absolute necessity of revelation with his concept of the threefold Word of God in Jesus Christ, scripture, and proclamation. In many ways, versions of both of these modern expressions of revelation—that of classic liberalism and the response of neo-orthodoxy—continue to inform Christian theology. Stroup concludes that contemporary theology wrestles with four issues in understanding revelation: 1) what we mean when we speak of God's agency in an event of disclosure, 2) how interpretation functions in our reception of revelation, 3) how we authenticate true interpretations of revelatory events, and 4) how Christian revelation relates to other religions.¹⁴ Christians, for the most part, continue to believe that much of our knowledge of God and the life of faith can be accessed only by means of God's revelation, but God's self-disclosure is neither straightforward nor uncomplicated, if we thoughtfully seek to understand God and human existence.

For United Methodists, reason is viewed as one of the interpretive lenses that help us to discern the meaning of scripture for faithful living in today's world. John Wesley understood the importance of engaging the capacity for reason, by which he meant "a tool or capacity for understanding," though he did not align with the rationalists of his day who sought knowledge apart from revelation.¹⁵ He also frequently drew upon scientific evidence of the eighteenth century for the sake of the gospel in the world. A good example is his *Primitive*

¹⁴ Ibid., 137–38.

¹⁵ Rebekah L. Miles, "The Instrumental Role of Reason," in Campbell et al., *Wesley and the Quadrilateral*, 86.

Physick, a book of prescriptions for various illnesses that was based upon the best medical knowledge of his day, and intended for use by his lay preachers to provide assistance to their parishioners, who generally could not afford medical care. Today's United Methodists continue to affirm the use of reason as a source for theological reflection. We engage reason to interpret scripture, ask questions, assess the clarity of our witness, and bring to bear "the full range of human knowledge, experience, and service" (see the section Theological Guidelines: Reason, in the *Book of Discipline*). Our use of reason as a source for theology helps to ensure our Christian faith and witness remain credible.

SOURCE: EXPERIENCE

The last common source or tool for theological reflection is experience. Here again, we find that engaging experience as a source for theology is somewhat complicated. Remember that experience came to the forefront during the Modern Era. In the eighteenth century, John Wesley critiqued the growing rationalism and deism of his day and argued that the Church of England had the form of religion without the substance or power of God. We might say that he perceived his church as going through the motions. The theology and practice of his Methodist movement added experience to the Anglican triad of scripture, tradition, and reason. By *experience*, Wesley referred primarily, though not exclusively, to the experience of God in the life of believers, accountable to the community of faith (not to be confused with an individualistic emphasis on one's own experiences). This often took the form of the assurance of one's faith, the witness of the Spirit, or a common, yet personal experience of the saving grace of God. This experience is central to classic eighteenth-century "evangelicalism." For Wesley, this experience of God, while individual and necessary for authenticating and appropriating the scriptural witnesses in

our own lives, was inevitably accountable to the community of faith, as he claimed there is no solitary religion. Thus, the experience or assurance of God's salvific work, as confirmed by the community in its faithfulness to scripture, remains an important source for theological reflection. Today's United Methodists "follow Wesley's practice of examining experience, both individual and corporate, for confirmations of the realities of God's grace attested in Scripture" (see the section Theological Guidelines: Experience, in the *Book of Discipline*).

In the nineteenth century, a second expression of experience as a theological source is articulated by Friedrich Schleiermacher. The phrase that best expresses Schleiermacher's understanding is "a feeling of absolute dependence," found in his major work, *The Christian Faith*. Schleiermacher rejects the notion that Christian faith is based in intellectual assent, and instead suggests that this feeling of our utter and complete dependence on the infinite, something beyond human capacities, forms the basis for understanding the Christian faith: "*the consciousness of being absolutely dependent, or, which is the same thing, of being in relation with God.*"¹⁶ This religious experience to which Schleiermacher points is an awareness of God and our human finitude; it is a particular kind of experience and not merely any event or emotion we might encounter. Much like Wesley's in the eighteenth century, Schleiermacher's emphasis on experience has a particular content that is dependent upon God's presence in the life of the believer.

In contemporary theological expressions, experience continues to be an important source, though two clear distortions are particularly present. The first is a theological distortion and the second is an individualistic one. In the theological distortion of experience as a source for theological reflection, some churches teach that the essence of

16 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, English translation of the 2nd German ed., eds. H.R. MacKintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), §4, p. 12, italics original.

Christian faith is simply a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, such that Jesus becomes “my” personal savior, and experience is reduced to my emotional connection to Jesus. Although theologians such as Wesley and Schleiermacher have illuminated the importance of the experience of God, this experience was never conceived as the fullness of the Christian faith, but rather an impetus toward living in relationship to God and others, as well as an aid to understanding the scriptural witnesses. Of course, there is a place for teaching about the experience of and relationship with Jesus Christ. Our point here is that when that personal experience becomes equated with the fullness of the faith, personal experience has been elevated to a privileged position that leads believers to neglect important dimensions of the Christian life attested to by the scriptures. The tendency toward individualism and autonomy characteristic of the Modern Era finds expression in this personalization of Jesus, almost as a sort of a personal possession.

The individualistic distortion occurs when experience is more broadly conceived as any experience or feeling encountered by an individual apart from any communal accountability. In this case, someone resorts to his or her own experience as the sole authority for beliefs and practices. For example, suppose someone claims to be a Christian, but holds to the belief and practice that God calls him to spend Sundays walking in the woods or sitting by a lake. His experience tells him that in these natural settings, he feels closest to God, and therefore, the church is not where he should practice his faith. Thus, his experience apart from scripture, tradition, and reason is guiding his understanding of the Christian life. In some ways, we might view this tendency as a product of Modernity’s emphasis on the individual.

Wesleyan Quadrilateral

By now you have probably discerned that the four common sources for theological reflection—scripture, tradition, reason, and experience—are

what United Methodists call the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral.” Of course, Wesley himself did not coin the phrase or consider it his “theological method.” Wesley followed the Anglican pattern of scripture, tradition, and reason, but through his desire to rekindle the depths of the faith in the Church of England, he turned to experience as another important source, especially for understanding the scriptural witnesses. He privileged scripture as the primary source, but used the other three to help him interpret and understand those witnesses. Today’s United Methodists draw on the four sources utilized by Wesley to continue his practice of careful theological reflection for the sake of Christian faith in the world.

So let’s consider the above example through the theological lenses of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience to discern whether or not spending each Sunday alone in nature seems to be a faithful and true theological position. If we turn first to scripture, what evidence might we bring to bear on this question? Certainly, in the negative sense, we do not find passages where Jesus or Paul or other biblical witnesses present this option as a valid one. But an argument from absence of evidence may not be our strongest case. Instead, we could consider passages that demonstrate the communal nature of faith found throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament. Certainly, the biblical witnesses regularly recount how those communities go astray and must be called back to authentic life in God. To some, that might seem a good basis for rejecting the community as necessary to the life of faith, but if we are unable to discern the will of God clearly together, what evidence do we have that one individual can be more faithful in discernment than a community? And while it is true that Jesus took time apart from the community, he inevitably did so only in order to return to the disciples and the people, renewed in spirit and purpose. The scriptures also express where two or three are gathered in Jesus’ name, he is there among them (Matt. 18:20). Thus, if someone is walking in the woods rather than worshipping with the

community, if it is for the purpose of returning with a deeper commitment to the common life, then we might consider that to be a valid expression. But if he is substituting the woods for the sanctuary, we might question its compatibility with scriptural witnesses. Here you might want to pause and consider other scriptural texts that could help you to assess the validity of walking in nature as a Christian practice in lieu of worship.

The second source for considering this question is the teachings of the tradition or, better, the traditions that compose the Christian faith. Where might we turn for insights into whether a person's decision to "worship" alone in nature might be considered a valid Christian belief and practice? We might want to begin with what our specific denomination has to say about the church and the life of worship. How important is worship to the United Methodist tradition? In the Confession of Faith, for example, Article XIII states, "We believe divine worship is essential to the life of the Church, and the assembling of the people of God for such worship is necessary to Christian fellowship and spiritual growth." Did John Wesley think walking alone in nature was an adequate expression of Christian worship? Here, for example, we might draw on Wesley's admonition that "it is the duty of every Christian to receive the Lord's Supper as often as he can."¹⁷ Holy Communion is ordinarily not available while walking in the woods.

Perhaps we could turn to the Patristic writings to gain a clearer sense of the origins of Christian worship and what it meant to worship God on a regular basis as a community. Augustine, for example, drew a sharp distinction between nature and grace, claiming that our life in God depends upon the presence of grace. Cyprian first claimed, "there is no salvation outside the church," and we might wish to explore his rationale for that claim. So we might ask whether

17 John Wesley's sermon "The Duty of Constant Communion," §I.

there are particular practices by which we receive God's grace. Here, we might reflect upon the sacraments that incorporate us into the church and offer ongoing reconciliation, and whether or not nature is able to substitute for the sacraments as understood by the long stream of Christians. Again, you might have other questions or considerations in relation to the tradition that could help you to wrestle with the question.

When we come to the exercise of reason—which we have already been engaging in our consideration of scripture and tradition—we find a host of questions and logical concerns. Is faith a private and individual matter, or is there an inescapably communal dimension? What are the marks of discipleship, and can they be seen in a person whose faith is primarily about a solitary relationship to God? What is missing in this form of worship and discipleship? Can the person rightly consider himself to be a Christian? What is the basis for making such a claim? Who has the authority to decide? Ultimately, can this person do as he pleases with no consequences? And if there are consequences, are they earthly, otherworldly, or something else entirely? You can probably add to this list, and I would encourage you to spend a few moments thinking about other questions you might ask through the exercise of reason.

Finally, this brings us back full circle to experience, which is where this question began. If someone feels closer to God in nature, is this feeling itself enough to suggest its faithfulness as a practice? We might also consider why the person doesn't feel close to God in worship. Is it the particular community and worship service? Is there something deeper going on within this person? It would be hard to conclude that one person's feeling should dictate appropriate expressions of Christian belief and practice.

As we can see from this short reflective exercise, careful and deliberate theological reflection depends upon more than one source, and claiming personal experience as the one valid authority for our faith is

fraught with pitfalls and blind spots. It might be the case that, in the contemporary era, many people depend upon personal experience as the sole basis for evaluating their lives and their Christian faith. When this occurs, there is no scriptural, historical, or reasoned basis that will cause us to change our minds. Thus, we become our own arbiters of truth, simply because we feel a particular way. But theological reflection on God and the content of the Christian faith inevitably requires us to be open to a journey of discovery. Faith in God is not a static condition, but involves an ongoing process of seeking to know and understand God more fully. In the final estimation, experience remains an important source for doing theology, but it must be placed into conversation with other sources and within the accountability of a community of faith.

Other Sources

Before we conclude our discussion of sources, we should note the introduction and use of other sources for theological reflection in recent decades. In Black theology, for example, theologians have drawn on slave narratives and the blues or spirituals as authentic expressions of Christian faith. Contemporary Native American theologians incorporate traditional Native ways into their theological projects, recognizing that God was present to them before Christian faith arrived on the continent. While some people might take exception to these newer sources, we should also remember that each of the sources we discussed above developed in response to the realities of a given theological era. Thus, the stream of theology will likely continue to encounter new ways of engaging and developing faithful witness to God.

CULTURE AND CONTEXT

The newer sources for doing theology, in many cases, arise out of and in response to particular cultural contexts. For generations, theology was the exclusive domain of educated men, often propertied,

and frequently Anglo or European. The theological statements they produced were considered to be universally applicable or appropriate for every human being. Their theologies were posited as “neutral” or largely free of context. But as theologians of color and women theologians began to publish theologies beginning in the 1970s, taking into account their social and cultural locations and claiming them as essential to their authentic Christian witness, these newer voices often faced criticism for naming their context and culture. Identified as “contextual theologies,” they were often marginalized by the majority culture, which claimed they were relevant only to a particular culture or group, thereby having limited value. As diverse voices continued to enter and shape the theological landscape, they could not be ignored and, in recent years, have shifted our understanding of the influence of context for doing theology. We should be clear, however, that there are theologians today who continue to marginalize, criticize, or ignore those theologies that engage cultural contexts.

Culture can be defined as a way of life or of organizing communities according to particular values, morals, practices, and social norms that are transmitted from generation to generation through language and material forms. We all live within multiple cultures, such as those of family, church, nation, region, racial or ethnic group, and so forth. But some cultural contexts take on greater significance in shaping our lives and understanding of the world. While some theologians continue to hold the view that Christian faith is context-free and should be universal, we also know that God became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth within a particular context at a particular time. God’s action in the incarnation seems to affirm the particularity of our human existence rather than to deny its importance. So, we have a certain scriptural basis for contextualizing and claiming the embodiment of our theologies.

How, then, has this sense of culture and context reshaped theological method in recent decades? First, we have come to realize that

no theology is neutral or context-free. The majority culture in any society considers its perspective and cultural characteristics as normative, which means those who belong to that dominant culture might seldom encounter and experience other cultural standards and expressions. But no culture is neutral; they are all value-laden. Churches often claim to be open to persons of different cultures, races, and ethnicities, but what they really mean is they are open to diverse persons so long as any new members adhere to existing cultural norms. Often white Americans do not see themselves as having a race or a particular culture because they compose the majority culture. When we consider that the membership of the mainline churches in the United States, United Methodism included, hovers around 90 percent white, non-Hispanic, even though the U.S. population as a whole is only around 64 percent white, non-Hispanic, we begin to see that, to minoritized racial and ethnic groups, the majority culture, perhaps, does not feel welcoming and open. Such is the case with theology as well. All theologies are products of particular contexts and cultures, despite claims to be neutral.

Second, in the Modern Era, the height of theological production was the creation of a systematic theology that examined the whole of the Christian faith, doctrine by doctrine. In recent theology, however, fewer comprehensive theological systems have been written, due at least in part to the growing sense that no one person can create a theology that is fitting, relevant, and meaningful for all contexts. Thus, contemporary theology textbooks are often written by a group of scholars from different perspectives, rather than one author. Theologies are written from a wide variety of perspectives by persons from across the globe. On the surface, this proliferation of voices may appear to be a fragmentation of the discipline or even the Christian faith, but the future is likely to witness even more diversity, given the widespread use of technology including social media, blogs, and so on. Of course, there has never been a time when a single theologian could

speak for all people, in the best interest of all people, and in terms that were meaningful to all. Knowing that human beings are finite creatures incapable of the infinite, we can conclude that no single person has the capacity to express the fullness of the faith in a timeless and universal fashion. The cacophony of voices in today's theological landscape offers a wealth of insights into the reality of God and the life of faith, and we have to learn to navigate these vastly different projects, including asking critical questions about whether they are valid expressions of the scriptural witnesses to Jesus Christ.

■ CENTRAL CONCERNS OR STARTING POINTS FOR THEOLOGY

The last area for our consideration in this brief overview of theological method is the central concern or starting point for doing theology, which shapes our theological method. The theological movements of the twentieth century can help us to see these methodological concerns more concretely. Though our synopsis here risks oversimplification, we are suggesting that theologies can often be identified and unpacked when we are able to identify a central, overarching concern or common theme that drives or defines the theologian's project. Asking this question of any theology will enable us to better understand or discern the method at work.

Karl Barth's neo-orthodox theology, for example, is centered in the premise of the Wholly Other God or God's utter transcendence and inaccessibility to human beings apart from the revelation of God in the threefold Word of Jesus Christ, the scriptures, and the church's proclamation. The sovereignty and transcendence of God undergird or weave together his theology. Conversely, Paul Tillich's theology begins with the human being and the existential concern or anxiety over the possibility of non-being, of estrangement, and of ambiguity and fragmentation. His method thus correlates these philosophical questions

with the answers provided by the Christian message: Being-Itself (God), Jesus the Christ as the New Being, and the Spirit. When we recognize that his theology is driven by this central concern for the angst of the human being in existential doubt, we begin to see it at work throughout his writings. For liberation theologians such as James Cone and Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz, the starting point or pivot point is the liberation of the oppressed, sometimes framed as a “preferential option for the poor” or marginalized and powerless. It is this reference to the lived experience of the people in the face of systemic injustices that leads into theological reflection as a second moment of engaging God. Finally, in relational theologies we note that the interrelationship of all life, even the cosmos, is the central concern for these theological projects. This basic premise of interrelationship will guide and shape the theological project and serve as a key basis for its coherence.

So what might we see as the starting point or central concern for John Wesley, his theology, and his Methodist movement in the eighteenth century? As you might imagine, there are some debates about how to characterize his theology, since it was practical and occasional in nature, aimed at the transformation of the hearts and lives of people in concrete settings. Some point to soteriology as Wesley’s main concern; others to grace. I would suggest the Great Commandment was the focal point for Wesley, as his theology and practice were meant to express the love of God and the love of neighbor as the heart and goal of the Christian faith. As you study Wesley’s sermons and writings, now and in the future, you will want to consider for yourself what might be Wesley’s central concern.

When we read a theological work, if we are able to identify this starting point or central concern, our comprehension will be aided considerably. Of course, while identifying a starting point or central concern enables us to uncover and articulate the theological method present in a theology, it remains a preliminary step in the real task of doing theology: delineating the content of the Christian faith, the

doctrines or teachings that shape our Christian identity. Chapter 4 will take us on that journey into the heart of theology, our basic beliefs.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What do we mean by “gender-neutral,” “inclusive,” and “expansive” theological language? Why is our use of language so central to theology?
2. How would you describe what a theological method is and does? How do the norm and criteria relate to a theological method? How would you begin to describe your own theological method for articulating what you believe?
3. Return to the discussion of whether walking alone in the woods every week is a faithful substitute for Christian worship. How does each of the sources for theology help us to reflect upon this question? Which source carries the most weight for your deliberations and why?
4. If you were to name your central concern in writing about what you believe as a Christian, what would it be and why?

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

Any good systematic theology textbook will cover the topics associated with theological method. See, for example, David Tracy, “Theological Method,” and Edward Farley and Peter C. Hodgson, “Scripture and Tradition,” in *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, newly updated edition, edited by Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994, 35–87.

Allen, Paul L. *Theological Method: A Guide for the Perplexed (Guides for the Perplexed)*. London: T&T Clark International, 2012.

Bohler, Caroline Jane. *God the What? What Our Metaphors for God Reveal about Our Beliefs in God*. Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2008.

Campbell, Ted A., W. Stephen Gunter, Scott J. Jones, Randy Maddox, and Rebekah L. Miles. *Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997.

Jasper, David. *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

Kaufman, Gordon. *An Essay on Theological Method*, third edition. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995.

Tanner, Kathryn. *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997.

WHAT DO WE BELIEVE?

While writing this book, I polled clergy colleagues, asking them to share stories of when their engagement of theology was central to a pastoral situation. Some responded that they weren't sure what I meant, which is not surprising since theology classes often teach the content without providing a sense of how theology is expressed in our ministries. Others responded with stories, often related to end-of-life situations. This, too, is not surprising. So often when life bursts our illusions of being in control, we ask questions about life, death, and what lies beyond. If it hasn't happened yet in your ministry, you will certainly face the question: What happens when we die? This is a theological question that begs us to reflect deeply and answer with great care. It is a question of salvation and eschatology. Someone might ask you: How can Jesus die on the cross if he's God? This is a question of Christology. Someone else might wonder why they struggle with a terrible addiction and if there is hope. Here we might draw upon theological anthropology, sin and evil, and grace. Our theology matters tremendously, and having the knowledge and language to respond to the deepest questions of our human existence is at the heart of our study of theology.

In the previous chapters, we have toured the flow of theological

movements and activity down through the centuries, observing some of the twists and turns of these churning waters. Then we began to construct a raft that might help us travel along this stream, piecing together sources, methods, and approaches to theology. Significantly, we also began to think about our own starting point and sources for doing theology, since each of us must develop our own *credo* (literally, “I believe”) or thoughtful understanding of what we believe. But all of that work, while important, is merely preliminary to the life that teems within these waters: our doctrines or teachings of the faith. Often we speak of the content of the Christian faith as a way of naming our theological concerns, our doctrines, our teachings. In this chapter, we examine the content of the Christian faith—though in a general and incomplete manner—so that you might begin to articulate, consciously and deliberately, where you stand within the stream and importantly, have the language to minister to a suffering and questioning world.

As you might expect, there is no one universally accepted set of beliefs or teachings held by all Christians. But we can turn to a skeletal framework that yields the common beliefs shared by most Christians—a starting point from which we diverge through deeper reflection and considerations. We will also note some of the distinctive United Methodist beliefs along the way. The basic outline of what Christians believe is found in the church’s creeds, those statements of faith hammered out at the councils of the early church. The Apostles’ Creed is most commonly used among Protestants, but the Nicene Creed also provides a good starting point for theological engagement. It might be helpful to pause here and recite the Apostles’ Creed aloud. Listen to the shape of the words and pay attention to the structure of the creed.

THE APOSTLES’ CREED

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
 who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
 born of the Virgin Mary,
 suffered under Pontius Pilate,
 was crucified, died, and was buried;
 On the third day he rose again;
 he ascended into heaven,
 he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
 and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
 the holy catholic Church,
 the communion of saints,
 the forgiveness of sins,
 the resurrection of the body,
 and the life everlasting.
 Amen.

Is there anything significant in the ordering of the faith claims? Are there beliefs that you would raise questions about? Every time the church or an individual recites a creed, we have taken the first step in doing theology, though often it is done as an embedded rather than deliberative theological act. How many times have you recited this creed, knowing the words by heart, but not consciously considered their meaning?

Go online and use a search engine to find an introduction to a systematic theology textbook (you will find suggestions at the end of this chapter). Websites where you can purchase books will often provide you with a free glimpse inside, enabling you to review the table of contents. Or you might borrow a theology textbook from a pastor, seminarian, or the library. In any case, make sure it is an introduction to systematic theology. Turn to the table of contents and read through it with some care. Do you see a resemblance to the creeds? While few

theology textbooks follow the Apostles' Creed exactly, you should still be able to discern a basic pattern to the teachings of the Christian faith. Check a second textbook in order to confirm this statement. All theology textbooks will cover the same broad set of doctrinal concerns. These usually include preliminaries such as method and sources (prolegomena), God, Jesus Christ (Christology and soteriology), the Holy Spirit (pneumatology), humanity (theological anthropology), the church (ecclesiology), and the last things (eschatology). As you might expect, each doctrine has various theological considerations associated with it that deepen, expand, and complicate that teaching. For example, the doctrine of God will usually include questions of not only God's nature but also the Trinity, creation, providence, theodicy, and other topics. Of course, how we explain and develop the detailed theological accounts within each doctrine varies by Christian tradition, denomination, and even era, which is why we do not have one common systematic theology textbook for all Christians in all times and places.

The diversity of interpretations and the intricacies of each doctrine mean that in this short book we cannot examine all the trajectories and different theological positions in detail. It is not my intention to direct you toward what I think are the "right" teachings or to impose my personal beliefs upon you, though I will share what The United Methodist Church holds to be correct belief with regard to its doctrinal standards. As a result, in the pages that follow two things will be emphasized. First, I want to help you grasp the basic contours of the broader doctrines and the key questions or concerns within each doctrine. The goal is to provide you with a sense of the points for further study and reflection, but the details of each doctrine are beyond the scope of this volume. Second, in doing so, I hope to encourage your deliberative reflection on questions that pastors often face from their congregations or must wrestle with in sermons, Bible studies, and pastoral situations. Remember our discussion in the introduction of the problems related to asserting that everything is "God's will"? The

basic doctrinal loci of the Christian faith should enable us to reflect more carefully and fully on such vital questions. So, with this in mind, let's dive into the stream and begin to swim around in these swiftly moving and life-giving waters.

Most theology textbooks begin with the doctrine of God—a pattern we will follow here. But we could begin with any doctrine, because the content of the Christian faith is interrelated, and one doctrine leads to and is connected to the others. In the theology of the German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, especially his early theology, for example, the starting point is eschatology or the notion that in the resurrection of Jesus Christ we find hope, which orients us toward God's promised future and our present mission in the world. Hope draws us forward toward God's good future. Thus, if he were to write a one-volume systematic theology, it might well begin with a chapter on eschatology as the focal point for how we do and enter into theological discourse. Depending upon the starting point or approach taken by a theologian, the order of the chapters might differ, but the same content would be presented. If you are a creative thinker, you might consider where you would begin your own theology and why that would be your focal or entry point. For our purposes, we will follow a more traditional order that approximates the Apostles' Creed.

■ I BELIEVE

The Apostles' Creed begins with this affirmation: I believe (*credo* in Latin). In his discussion of the Apostles' Creed, Karl Barth points us toward the purpose and power of that affirmation: "In Christian faith we are concerned decisively with a meeting. 'I believe in'—so the [Apostles' Creed] says; and everything depends on this 'in.'"¹ We believe *in*. Thus, at the outset we encounter the reality that our belief

1 Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 15.

and our practice as Christians begin with faith, and as such, our overview of doctrine must also begin with a consideration of what we mean by *faith*, since there is no grasping or being grasped by the divine reality without it.

Faith, in its simplest expression, is trust or confidence in another. We have confidence that we can rely on this other. In the Christian context, we place our trust in God, and our faith speaks of and points toward God. The scriptures are essentially an expression of faith. From Abraham's travels and travails to the encouragement of Revelation to "hold on!" in the midst of persecution, the Old and New Testaments bear witness to the centrality, the necessity of faith. Without faith, the Bible becomes a book much like any other that can be read as literature. Without faith, our beliefs become propositions that lack credibility and power in our lives.

Typically, theologians posit two dimensions to faith. The first relates to knowledge of the articles or precepts of the Christian faith. By faith we understand the Church's teachings about the life of faith; we examine them, and we assent to them. Faith does not imply that we must or should set aside our human capacities or rationality. Nevertheless, in our acceptance of the content of the Christian faith, we also recognize these beliefs cannot be proven true based upon scientific inquiry and hard evidence. The second dimension of faith, the notion of trust, is considered by many theologians as that which activates or opens up God's promises and presence in the believer. Significantly, McGrath helps us to understand that faith and its effectiveness are not a result of anything that we do as human beings: "The efficacy of faith does not rest upon the intensity with which we believe, but in the reliability of the one in whom we believe."² Faith, even as knowledge and trust, remains rooted,

2 Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 183.

grounded, and activated by the *in*, by the reality of God's graciousness toward humanity.

McGrath notes that the Scholastic theologians, notably Thomas Aquinas, tended toward the first definition of faith as intellectual assent. In the pre-Enlightenment Medieval Era, prior to the rise of the scientific method, Aquinas viewed theology as a "science" (something that can be demonstrably true) and asserted that "the Christian faith can be shown to be consistent with human reason."³ The second definition, which emphasizes faith as trust, comes to prominence in the Reformation, particularly through the theology of Martin Luther and his doctrine of justification by faith alone. Turning to McGrath again for clarity, we can elucidate three basic aspects to Luther's doctrine: 1) Faith is personal and not simply a form of historical knowledge; 2) faith trusts in God's promises; and 3) "faith unites the believer to Christ."⁴

It is within this milieu, with its two senses of faith, that John Wesley's understanding was formed. Wesley's personal journey shaped his understanding of faith. Reared in the home of Samuel and Susanna Wesley, John was instructed in the Christian faith from the beginning, and he intellectually assented to the Christian beliefs. Like Aquinas, Wesley considered Christian faith to be reasonable. But his encounters with the Moravians, particularly during his voyage to and time in America, placed him into a personal crisis of faith that found some resolution on May 24, 1738, at Aldersgate, when his heart was "strangely warmed"—what most scholars regard as Wesley's first experience of assurance. This reflects the experiential sense of faith that Luther articulated as personal, trusting, and uniting the believer with Christ. Wesley's mature understanding of faith essentially combines the head and the heart, intellectual assent and personal trust, but inevitably focuses on the spiritual experience, even a kind of evidence

3 Ibid., 182.

4 Ibid.

of God's love in the life of each believer. At its core, faith is a gift that can be received through God's graciousness.

Notably, following his Aldersgate experience, Wesley was soon disappointed that the sense of joy and peace did not remain continually present to him. Thus, he began to develop an understanding of degrees of faith. As Randy Maddox explains, Wesley's mature understanding of faith distinguished "between saving [justifying] faith and a full assurance of that faith" or a sense "that someone could be *truly* Christian (albeit, imperfect) who was not yet *fully* Christian."⁵ Thus, we should not consider faith an either/or proposition, but rather a gift that, through our reliance on God's grace, can grow and strengthen across our lifetime.

Indeed, for Wesley, faith plays an active and essential role in the salvation journey, and is not simply the act of confessing Jesus Christ and receiving the forgiveness of sins. Through God's gift of prevenient grace, we are awakened to God's overtures and our sinfulness. Receiving (rather than rejecting) that graceful offer of faith, we are led to repentance, which Wesley considers the only necessary condition for justification. Thus, we are justified by faith, but our only role in justification is the acceptance of the gift of faith. Faith and repentance "answer one another" in the sense that, "Repentance forces us to confess that apart from God's grace we can do nothing, while faith assures us that, 'I can do all things through Christ strengthening me.'"⁶ Faith is at work in not only justification but also the sanctification process. Here it is important to note, as Maddox emphasizes, "this connection of faith to sanctification . . . implies that faith is not the epitome of Christian religion, as many Protestants are inclined to claim. For Wesley faith is the handmaid of love."⁷ In other words,

5 Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 126, italics original.

6 Ibid., 174.

7 Ibid.

God's love toward us is the source of our faith; but at the same time, our faith (as the Spirit working within us) is the source of our love for God and neighbor. In sum, we are not only justified by faith, but our growth in holiness is fueled by that same gift of faith.

As United Methodists, we follow this Wesleyan understanding of faith. In the section "Distinctive Wesleyan Emphases" of the *Book of Discipline*, it claims that "Faith is the only response essential for salvation." This sentence points us toward our acceptance of the gift of faith that leads to the process of repentance, justification, and sanctification. It should not be read as suggesting a one-time act that results in our salvation; but rather that our decision to choose faith is the only role we human beings have in this process, and we must choose to believe each day. We will have more to say about salvation at a later point in this chapter. For now, we return to the Apostles' Creed, remembering that it all begins with this act of faith, receiving God's gracious gift in the midst of our human brokenness, and crying out, "I believe! I believe *in . . .*"

■ I BELIEVE IN GOD

As we mentioned in chapter 1, the entirety of the study of the Christian faith begins and ends with God. We think of *God* as a name for the ultimate reality or divine being, though *God* is actually symbolic language. A symbol is something that both points to and participates in something else. For example, a nation's flag is a symbol; it points to that nation but also is deeply woven into the identity of the people. A symbol stands in contrast to a sign, which simply points to something else. Take, for example, a stop sign. It points toward the action the driver must take, but does not participate in or carry meaning beyond that momentary action. Thus, when we speak of this word *God* as being symbolic, we do not diminish the divine reality, but instead acknowledge our finitude in trying to name the fullness of the

divine. God is not really the given name of the divine, but the symbol we use to point to and convey the meaning of the One we recognize as ultimate.

Recognizing that God is the symbol we use for the divine begins to awaken our minds and spirits to think more deeply and carefully about the subject of our faith. Suppose for a moment you are on an airplane or in a coffee shop, and a stranger sitting next to you sees that you're reading this book. The stranger asks what you are reading, and you explain that it is an introduction to the study of God and the life of faith, to what Christians believe. Then the stranger says, "I'm a scientist and believe in hard data," and asks you this question: "Who is this God? Why should anyone believe in this unseen being? What makes God worthy of study or devotion or worship?" How would you begin to respond to the stranger? I imagine many would offer two basic responses. First, that God is love. But unless we are able to explain that God's love is of a different nature than human love, and what it means when we claim that God is love, our answer might not be very satisfying to the stranger. Second, we might respond with a claim that God is the creator of everything and the source of our salvation. But how will we make the idea of creation meaningful to a scientifically oriented mind? And how would we describe salvation to this person? If we simply say it is the promise of heaven, that answer will likely fall on deaf ears as a concept that seems irrelevant or silly to many people today.

To answer well the question of who God is and why we care about and are devoted to God, we need to begin by asking questions and learning as much as possible about God. Theology, at heart, is a discipline of asking questions. The more you learn about God and the life of faith, the more questions you will have. It seems paradoxical; you would expect to have more answers. Of course, you do have more knowledge or understanding, but the reality of God is such that the more we ask and begin to understand, the more questions we

are likely to have. And the more we will be humbled and in awe of this One we call God. Don't worry; God can stand up to our scrutiny and questions. After all, if we believe that God created human beings, then it is surely the case that God intends for us to use our minds to question and to learn.

In considering the doctrine of God, traditional theology will often begin with questions about the nature and attributes or characteristics of God. Ask yourself what you know about the nature of God; perhaps write down a list of attributes as a starting point. Then, as we go along, you can add to that list and begin to expand your understanding of who God is. But as you do so, you might find yourself wondering how we know anything about God. As we discussed in chapter 3, Christians have generally believed that we can know something of God through nature (general revelation), but our most intimate knowledge of God comes through special revelation and, in particular, through the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth who is the Christ. Thus, we might begin by asking ourselves what we know about God from the scriptural witnesses.

There are, of course, a variety of biblical witnesses and a range of attributes ascribed to God, but there is no systematic accounting or comprehensive statement of who God is. Moses' encounter with the burning bush provides a starting point by reminding us that God will be who God will be (Exod. 3:14). Throughout our discussion of the doctrine of God, it will be helpful to keep in mind this divine excess that overflows our human capacities to know in full. The Bible tells us that God is creative, just, righteous, steadfast, loving, compassionate, and jealous, among other qualities. If we are reading carefully, we also would find that God is vindictive at times and sends the people of Israel to kill other peoples in battle. In both cases—whether the attributes are positive or seem less than divine—we are left to interpret the biblical witnesses and to confront our human limitations in fully understanding the nature of God. As human beings, we can use only

our own frames of reference to interpret these claims to the nature of God. We can never know God in God's self.

Intellectually, there are three basic ways to approach our knowledge of these attributes, as proposed centuries ago by Thomas Aquinas. First is the *via negativa* (the way of negation) by which we are able to look at all the imperfections of the created world in order to assess what God is not or to assign to God the opposite quality. Thus, we are able to claim that God is not finite (e.g., *in-finite*). God is not arbitrary and capricious. God is not subject to decay and death. You can add to this list other qualities by way of negation. Second, we engage what is known as the *via causalitatis*, which means, "the way of causality" or the idea that God is the cause or source of all things such as wisdom or goodness. The third approach, *via eminentiae* (the way of eminence) suggests that the perfections of the world can be attributed to God in a higher or more perfect sense (e.g., *all-powerful* or *omnipotent*), though remember that we should not assume God is simply quantitatively more of any attribute we observe in human beings. Some attributes of God might be considered as internal to God in God's self (e.g., perfection or unity), while others might be understood in relation to the world (e.g., freedom or mercy).

Thus, even though we have a tendency to speak of God as a "being," God is not a being in the sense of any other being that we know or can imagine. The character of God differs fundamentally from that of created beings, and for this reason, Paul Tillich used the phrases "Being Itself" and "the Ground of Being" to refer to this absolute distinction between God and all else. The classical formulation of God's existence, Anselm's ontological argument, points toward this fundamental distinction when it claims, "thou art a being than which nothing greater can be conceived." Though Anselm, an eleventh-century Benedictine theologian, uses the terminology of God as "a being," he also suggests that our notion of this "being" is at the furthest reaches of our intellect and reason. Anselm's point is to prove the existence

of God by means of a complex logic characteristic of the Scholastic theologians. Still, his ontological argument is helpful in identifying the distinctiveness of the “being-ness” of God.

But how does God relate to the world and to human beings? If a person is a “deist,” he or she believes that God set the world in motion, but is no longer involved in its ongoing development and existence. Usually, we use the analogy of a clockmaker winding up the clock and then leaving it to run on its own. In other words, for deists, nothing that happens should be attributed to God’s will or providence or agency. But most Christians are “theists,” believing in the relationship of God to the created order. How much “control” God exerts over the creation is a matter of debate. If we believe that God determines absolutely everything that happens, then it is reasonable to claim that anything and everything is “God’s will.” If we hold a position in which God is involved in the world, but does not dictate each moment and, in fact, gives us free will, then ascribing everything to “God’s will” is meaningless and, perhaps, lazy thinking. We can do better if we want to communicate to others about the God we worship and serve.

GOD’S TRANSCENDENCE

Two terms commonly characterize the way in which God relates to and is present to the world: *transcendence* and *immanence*. God’s transcendence denotes, in the language of Karl Barth, God’s “wholly otherness.” Transcendence suggests that God is set apart from the created order and is inaccessible to the human mind and senses. God is not found in human experience. God transcends our experience. God is shrouded in mystery, and the divine is unknowable and unapproachable, which might be reflected in the first creation story in Genesis 1:1–2:3. Sometimes Christians behave as if they know God’s will or truth with absolute certainty. Yet the transcendence of God

reminds us that we are never in possession of the full truth, will, knowledge, or presence of God. God is removed and at a distance from human beings. Transcendence also relates to God's sovereignty, the notion that God has the final word or governs the universe and all that is within it. Traditionally, theists have stressed the otherness of God. Some theists so emphasize transcendence or the distinction between God and all created things, that they virtually eliminate any sense of God's presence or relationship to the world.

GOD'S IMMANENCE

Yet, simultaneously, we believe God is present to us and active within the cosmos. The word we use is *immanence* (not to be confused with *imminence*). God is immanent within the created order, in time and space, though not in physical form (except, of course, for the historical point of the incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth). Some interpreters suggest that God's immanence is highlighted in the second creation story in Genesis 2:4b–3:24. Immanence means that we can speak of God being with us and never leaving us alone or "orphaned" (John 14:18).

Two clarifications should be made here about how God is present in the world. *Pantheism* argues that God and the natural world or universe are identical or equated, which might be considered the extreme form of immanence. God is utterly and completely present to and in the created world; the created order is God's very self. Therefore, pantheists eliminate the possibility of transcendence. The concept of *panentheism* goes in a different direction, claiming a middle ground in which God is present, yet not equated with the creation. It neither isolates God from the world in stressing transcendence nor identifies or equates God with the world in stressing immanence. Thus, panentheism emphasizes the relationship between God and the created order. Sallie McFague and process theologians, among others, have engaged and developed notions of panentheism in contemporary theology,

though critics have charged them with not taking transcendence seriously enough. Nonetheless, theology wrestles with the transcendence and immanence of God and generally seeks to find a balance between the two concepts. Where would you locate yourself among these options? How do you believe God relates to the created order?

THE TRINITY

There is a second way to engage this idea of the relationality of God, and that is through the doctrine of the Trinity. The biblical witnesses and early Christian practices, such as the baptismal formula, accepted the divinity of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, but had to clarify how we can claim to be monotheistic and yet identify these three forms in which the divine is known. The classical formulation became “one substance (*ousia*) in three persons (*hypostases*).” The one God is known in these three modes or persons or ways. This doctrine of the Trinity is at the heart of the mystery of God’s self-revelation. One analogy that may help us understand the Trinitarian formulation is the physical matter we know as H₂O, which can take the form of ice, water, and steam, yet remains fundamentally the same chemical substance. Of course, we remember that all metaphors or analogies break down at some point; obviously God is not physical matter with a molecular structure. But the imagery may be helpful in conceptualizing the Trinity as one substance expressed in three persons.

Typically, the relationality of the Trinity is further distinguished in the language of the immanent or essential Trinity and the economic Trinity. The immanent or essential Trinity refers to the interrelationship of the three persons of God within God’s self, which remains hidden to us. We are unable to know who God is within God’s self (the language used to refer to God’s own being-ness is God *in se*), traditionally understood as unchanging; though theologians have often debated whether God, in fact, can and does change. Here the

term *perichoresis* or the “mutual indwelling” of the three persons is sometimes used to describe the interrelationship of the three persons. There is, in the words of Saint Augustine, a “society of love” or a mutual indwelling within God, a way of sharing in the “life” of each person of the Godhead. More recently, liberation theologians have drawn on the concept of the equality and mutuality of the three “persons” of God to suggest it provides an appropriate model for human communities. Still, we must recognize that even as theologians posit such mutual indwelling, we have no way of actually confirming who God is *in se*.

Of great importance to the Christian faith is our belief that God has chosen to reveal God’s self in the form of three persons, traditionally named as God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit (or Holy Ghost in the past). This is the economic trinity, or the way in which God has been made known in relationship to the world. The word *economic* comes from the Greek word *oikonomikos*, referring to the management of a household or the organizing of a system. In the Christian context, *economic* takes on the sense of God’s work in the process of salvation unfolding in history. In the economic trinity, viewed from the perspective of the human creatures who are the object of God’s work of salvation, the way God is revealed has changed over the course of salvation history. Consider the incarnation and Jesus’ sending of the Holy Spirit, which appear to human history as new expressions (though, of course, the Spirit is present in the Hebrew Scriptures, and interpreters have considered those early witnesses also point to Jesus Christ). In an oversimplification, the economic trinity is about the way God relates to the world and the work God is doing in history on behalf of the redemption and reconciliation of the whole of creation. Notice that in the working of the Trinity in the world, the emphasis is placed upon salvation history and the relationship of the Triune God to the reconciliation of the whole of creation. This is not an individualistic concept in which God is concerned with *my*

salvation, but rather, God is at work throughout human history for the sake of the healing and wholeness of the cosmos.

WHY DO BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE?

Now, when we claim that God, as known in the economic Trinity, is at work on behalf of the whole of creation, we are forced to wrestle with the problem of evil or theodicy, in theological terms. Theodicy is one of the thorniest theological issues we will ever encounter. In contemporary terms, the question might be, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” Here again, we encounter that often-forwarded claim to “God’s will” as the answer to difficult questions. But “God’s will” is a hugely problematic claim in the face of evil. Let’s begin by defining *evil*. According to Langdon Gilkey, evil can be defined as “that which thwarts continuously and seriously the potential goodness of creation, destroying alike its intelligibility and meaning and making life as we experience it so threatening, so full of sorrow, suffering, and apparent pointlessness.”⁸ Evil, by nature, is opposed to God; it is a perversion of the goodness of creation and creatures. Thus, when we ascribe everything to God, we are claiming that God has evil motives or that we simply do not understand the goodness that exists within what we understand as evil. Traditionally, the problem of evil is articulated in a simple formula: If God is good and God is omnipotent, then how can evil exist? Stated differently, if there is evil, either God is not good or God is not all powerful. Yet most Christians believe that God is both good and omnipotent.

As you might imagine, answers to theodicy have been posited down through the ages. For the Patristic writer Irenaeus, the presence of evil in the world serves a catechetical function; its purpose is to enable spiritual growth and maturity, teaching us about righteousness. In the contemporary era, process theologians have taken this notion

8 Langdon Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth: The Christian Doctrine of Creation in the Light of Modern Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1965), 209–210.

of learning the difference between good and evil and suggested that God is self-limiting and works by means of persuasion rather than coercion.⁹ We find that in the traditional understanding, it is not that God lacks goodness or power, but rather the presence of evil can be attributed to God's decision to give human beings free will to choose the good and thereby advance as human beings and as communities. But considering the presence of evil as an opportunity to learn and mature is problematic and often criticized in the light of genocide, weapons of mass destruction, and brutal acts of terrorism and violence. Surely there would be better ways to learn what is good than suffering through such atrocities.

Sometimes Christians have tried to respond to the problem of evil with a dualistic answer: matter is evil and spirit is good. Manichaeism held this position, and this idea reappears in different forms throughout Christian history. Early on, Saint Augustine rejected this dualistic approach (after a brief foray into Manichaeism himself) and argued that God's creation was deemed "good" in the beginning. Thus, the material, physical world cannot be evil in itself. Rather, God's decision to allow human beings free will meant that they could and did choose evil. It was through the actions of the human creature that evil entered the world. Yet, because this leaves open the question of how evil could even be a choice, Augustine considered Satan as the source of this possibility, and the first humans, through their disobedience, opened the door to evil. Yet, once again, this leads to a question without a satisfactory answer: Who made Satan? Where did he originate? For Augustine, Satan was a fallen angel, created out of God's goodness, but in wanting to be like God, he disobeyed and thus evil entered into existence. Yet this does not resolve the intellectual

9 Process theology, derived from the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead by theologians such as Charles Hartshorne, John Cobb, and Marjorie Suchocki, suggests that God is, in fact, influenced by temporal processes and uses persuasion rather than coercion to further the divine mission in the world.

dilemma, as we have no answer for how a good angel could turn evil. Although Augustine's response to the problem of evil falls short of a full explanation, it has often been the standard response, especially in the murky figure of Satan as the real source of evil, thereby separating evil from God's goodness and omnipotence. In any case, theodicy continues to be an important concern among Christians and a subject raised by those who question the existence of God.

When we speak of evil and the problem of evil, it is also important to distinguish between natural and moral evil. Natural evil refers to the suffering that arises from natural processes, such as a tornado or flood, or diseases like cancer with no known cause of origin. Clearly, there is a terribly destructive dimension to the natural order. It has been proposed traditionally that creation fell when the human creature fell and shall be restored to good order when humanity is redeemed and reconciled to God. Such a response does not fully answer all the questions we might have about natural evil. Nor do we have complete understanding of moral evil, which is the suffering and destruction that arises from free will and our corrupted nature, out of the freedom human beings have to choose and act either toward serving the self or, aided by grace, others. The problems mentioned above, such as genocide and terrorism, fall into this category of moral evil. So, too, do bullying, white-collar crime that wipes out the savings of middle-class investors, and often preventable diseases that arise out of bad choices and reckless behavior. Moral evil can be seen to relate to sin, disobedience, or turning away from God. In either case, whether natural or moral in origin, the presence of evil persists. How comfortable are you, in light of what we have now considered, with the idea that everything is God's will?

THE DOCTRINE OF CREATION

Before we leave this brief introduction to the doctrine of God, there is at least one more consideration deserving our attention. It is the

doctrine of creation. Based upon the Genesis accounts of creation, several theological concepts are indicated. First is the notion of creation *ex nihilo*, which means creation “out of nothing.” There was not some pre-existent matter that God then formed. The creation did not emanate from God—as Greek philosophy had posited—but out of nothingness. The idea of nothing is hard for us to grasp. When you ask your friend, “What are you doing?” and she answers, “Nothing,” she is still doing something.

While we simply cannot grasp the idea of nothingness, creation *ex nihilo* suggests at least two things for Christians. First, it is an historical claim. Our salvation history has a beginning point and, we believe, an ending point in which the fallen creation will be restored. For Dietrich Bonhoeffer, creation is a boundary that the human creature is incapable of thinking beyond. It is part and parcel of our finitude to live in the middle, between the beginning and the end, not able to see or think beyond the boundaries. Second, we claim that in the act of creation, God ordered and organized the cosmos. As we mentioned previously, all of creation is orderly and reliable; for example, we know that the sun will rise and set in a predictable manner and that living things age, rather than growing younger as in the movie *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. Thus, everything that exists is a result of God’s creative activity and agency. We believe that God was not compelled to create anything, and did so out of God’s goodness and free choice. God does not depend upon anything created, though we acknowledge that the creation depends upon God’s continued preservation of all things. Though evil exists, and we might claim the world is fallen, it nevertheless does not cease to possess the contours of the original goodness in which it was made, nor does it ever cease to be that which is created.

This understanding of creation is often contested by modern science, as it considers the Christian concept of creation to be incompatible with scientific knowledge that is gained through observation, replicable testing, and data collection. There is virtually nothing

associated with the life of faith or the doctrine of creation that can be validated according to scientific principles. Today, a number of theologians are working to bridge the divide between faith and science and to demonstrate their compatibility. John Polkinghorne, for example, has argued that while science believes evolution or *creatio continua* is opposed to traditional Christian doctrine, in actuality, God respects the processes put into place at the creation and thus, evolution can be validated within the theological understanding of Christians. Admittedly, some Christians uphold a fundamentalist and literal interpretation of scripture, which cannot be reconciled with scientific knowledge. But for most Christians who understand the interpretive nature of the scriptural witnesses, science can prove to be an engaging dialogue partner. Even so, one of the challenges Christians face in the contemporary age is the many questions people raise about the existence of God and reliable knowledge of the divine reality. This is a central task for Christian apologetics in the twenty-first century.

WESLEY AND UNITED METHODISTS ON THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

So where might we locate John Wesley and United Methodists on the doctrine of God? We find a fairly traditional understanding of God, as articulated in Article I of the Articles of Religion:

There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body or parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the maker and preserver of all things, both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.¹⁰

Wesley understood *God* to mean both the Father and the inseparable

10 Compare this with Article I of the Confession of Faith.

three persons of the Trinity. But of particular, even central, importance for United Methodists is the concept of God's grace.

Grace, by definition, is "the undeserved, unmerited, and loving action of God in human existence through the ever-present Holy Spirit." It is resistible, in the sense that it invites a response from us, which is required for it to be fully effective in our lives. Grace is God's love for humanity, meeting us where we are in our journey of faith, expressed most significantly in terms of prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace. Prevenient grace is the grace that "precedes any and all of our conscious impulses"; it is the grace that always goes before us and always precedes our understanding. It "prompts our first wish to please God, our first glimmer of understanding concerning God's will, and our 'first slight transient conviction' of having sinned against God." Thus, when convicted or awakened, repentance (turning back toward God) is the essence of our response to prevenient grace.¹¹

When the Spirit witnesses to our spirit, we receive the gift of faith.¹² As such, prevenient grace is the starting point for our restoration. Justifying grace offers us the forgiveness of sins by which we are "restored to God's favor." Justifying grace is what "God *does for us* through his Son"¹³ in offering pardon, and the only necessary condition of justification is faith.¹⁴ Through justifying grace God acts to declare us righteous, as if a judge in a courtroom, dismissing the charges against us. Thus, the penalty or guilt of sin is removed, and a relative change occurs. But the real change, the inward renewal, the work of actually becoming righteous, is prompted by the Holy Spirit through sanctifying grace. Sanctifying grace is the work God does in us to facilitate our growth in love, so that we grow to love God with

11 The quotations in this paragraph are taken from the *Discipline*, "Distinctive Wesleyan Emphases."

12 See Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 173–74.

13 See John Wesley's sermon "Justification by Faith," §II.1.

14 *Ibid.*, §IV.5.

all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. As Wesley says, “by sanctification we are saved from the power and root of sin, and restored to the image of God.”¹⁵ Faith is both the condition and instrument of sanctification.¹⁶ Prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace thus compose the substance of the way of salvation, the way in which we might be delivered from sin, restored to right relationship, and made perfect in love. This grace-filled journey is the work of God for us and in us.

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE ABOUT GOD?

There is so much more, infinitely more, we could say about the doctrine of God: God’s nature and attributes, the relationship of God to the created order, the problem of evil, the concept of creation, impassibility or the idea of whether God can suffer, and so on. This brief introduction is intended only to begin your journey into understanding who God is and how God is at work in history. At this point, you might wish to pause and make some notes on what you believe about God. You might also indicate what new insights you have gained over the course of these few pages. How would you now answer the person beside you on the airplane who is scientifically minded? What are the questions that continue to capture your interest; what do you want to study in greater depth? Remember, theology—like faith itself—is a journey of discovery, but of course, the more we learn about God, the more questions we will inevitably have.

■ I BELIEVE IN JESUS CHRIST

When we think of our faith and what it means to be a Christian, we automatically turn to the significance of Jesus Christ. We are concerned

¹⁵ See John Wesley’s sermon “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” §II.1.

¹⁶ “The First Annual Conference, Monday June 25, 1755,” in *John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 140–41.

with who he is and what he does, as well as how we should follow and live out his example. Clearly, the doctrine of Jesus Christ is at the center of the Christian faith. Our understanding of who Jesus Christ is and what he does, the person and the work, Christology and soteriology, needs to be deeply examined and carefully expressed. Thus, as we turn to our teachings about Jesus Christ, we are faced with the impossibility of doing this doctrine justice in a few short pages. Our strategy, then, is first to consider the biblical witnesses to Jesus. Second, we will touch briefly on the theological debates around Jesus Christ in the early church, which set the foundation for our christological understanding. Third, we will consider the meaning of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which will include considerations of his work or soteriology. Finally, we conclude this section with a brief consideration of United Methodist teachings on Jesus Christ.

So, to begin, who do you say that Jesus Christ is? How do you understand who he is and what he has accomplished on behalf of the world, and how would you explain that to others? And, who is Jesus Christ for us *today*? Most Christians talk quite a bit about Jesus. Many pray to Jesus. The Gospels share the good news of Jesus Christ. Yet, at times our conceptions about Jesus Christ are shallow, misty renderings of this one who is central to our faith. In this section, we want to open up new pathways into the person and work of Jesus Christ to see if our vision might grow sharper.

Imagine you are in mission with your church, helping to build a Habitat for Humanity house alongside other groups from the community. As you and another person are painting walls inside the house, you begin a conversation with the woman beside you. She is not a person of faith, and she asks you how a man who was a good teacher two thousand years ago could now be worshiped as the Savior. While she thinks he was a good, moral person with wisdom, she has a hard time with the notion that Jesus of Nazareth could be God. How would

you begin to respond? Surely, you couldn't just say, "The Bible tells me so, and I believe it." That would be an unsatisfying answer to this woman. So then, how did Christians come to this understanding of Jesus? Could you help her see how the tradition and the biblical witnesses have woven together through the centuries to enable our belief? Could you express to her who Jesus Christ is for us today, in this day and age, and why he is central to your life? Let's look at the doctrine of Jesus Christ with an eye toward your ability to share a carefully crafted answer about Jesus Christ, the center of our faith.

THE BIBLICAL WITNESSES TO JESUS

There is good reason to begin with the biblical and historical basis for this doctrine, the witnesses to the life of Jesus of Nazareth, the one to whom the New Testament and the Gospels, in particular, bear witness and to whom the church has sought to be faithful through the centuries. In the person of Jesus and our access to him through these witnesses, we are provided with the fullest revelation of who God is and who we are created to be. Without this starting point, we would be limited in our ability to articulate anything about our Christian faith. This starting point of the testimony of scripture and tradition in developing the doctrine of Jesus Christ also provides us with an example of how these two primary sources are applied in the practice of theological reflection.

Christology begins with the New Testament. Before there were church councils and various discussions *about* Jesus Christ, there were witnesses *to* his life, death, and resurrection. Certainly, no witness provides a perfectly accurate account, and each witness has a particular lens through which to view the historical life. Each witness tells the story in a particular way so as to emphasize specific aspects of what has been revealed in Jesus Christ in order to have the greatest impact upon the intended audience. So we should realize that the scriptural

testimony is already presenting us with various theological interpretations. There is no one biblical Christology, but various accounts, which is why it has been suggested that the biblical witnesses are more like an oil painting than a photograph of Jesus. The Gospels are not intended to be historical records, but to offer the good news of Jesus Christ pieced together from the oral accounts that had circulated over the decades before the Gospels were recorded. From the beginning, Christians have sought to understand the person and work of Jesus Christ, but there has never been unanimity in expressing these concerns. This is also to say that Christians have always been attentive to the question, “Who is Jesus Christ for us today?”

The New Testament is our primary source for Christology, but it is meaningful only within the context of the Hebrew Scriptures. *Christ* is, of course, the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *mashiah* or messiah. *Messiah* means someone who has been anointed, and the messiah was associated with the eschatological expectations of Israel. Although many people could be anointed—kings, priests, prophets—the coming messiah was to be a king like David, who would restore the greatness of Israel. This messiah was to be a political, military leader. But Jesus did not fulfill these expectations; his battles were not military ones, and he rejected being considered a “king.” Jesus reached out to those whom society despised and marginalized, he challenged the authorities of his day, and he questioned their practices. No wonder the political and religious leaders of his day felt threatened by him and turned against his message. Thus, when the New Testament points to Jesus as the messiah, a process is underway of redefining the meaning of the messiah or the Christ. In 1 Corinthians 15:3, Paul uses the word “Christ” simply as a reference to Jesus, implying that, by definition, who he is and what he does is the true meaning of the messiah. If nothing else, we should be reminded to be careful in expressing our own expectations about Jesus who is the Christ.

Other titles present in the New Testament include Son of God and

Son of Man, Lord, and Rabbi. Each of these biblical titles offers some insight into the person of Jesus Christ. Neither Son of God nor Son of Man was a title given only to Jesus, as in Hebrew (*ben*) or Aramaic (*bar*), *son* meant “belonging to.” This usage might be indicated by Mark 2:27, 28, or in Exodus 4:22, when Israel is declared to be God’s firstborn “son,” though this language applied to Jesus will point theologians toward the recognition of Jesus as fully human and fully divine. “Lord” is a title that referred to God, Yahweh, in the Hebrew Scriptures, and the confession that “Jesus is Lord” (Rom. 10:9) becomes one of the earliest christological confessions. We can see that the New Testament begins to point toward one of the fundamental doctrinal statements about Jesus, though it will be early in the fourth century before the church affirms the equality of Jesus with God. Finally, we should remember that Jesus was a rabbi, a teacher of Israel, having studied the law in the temple. But as his ministry unfolds, his teachings have the authority not of the priests, scribes, and prophets, but of God. In sum, the ways in which the New Testament writers refer to Jesus become a key source of information and deliberation over the identity of Jesus Christ. These biblical witnesses are providing answers to the question, “Who is Jesus Christ?”

Of course, the titles applied to Jesus are only one source for understanding who he is. The writings of Paul are also an important theological basis for our doctrine of Jesus Christ, though which letters are authentically Paul’s is a matter of debate among New Testament scholars. Nonetheless, as the earliest documents about Jesus, Paul’s letters are especially important in the development of Christology, and we can discern a few basic themes they address. These themes are: Jesus’ humanity, divinity, crucifixion, and resurrection, and finally, his *parousia* or expected return.

Paul expresses clearly that Jesus existed as a human being, “born of a woman, born under the law” (Gal. 4:4) and that he “descended from David according to the flesh” (Rom. 1:3). Paul also contrasts the

sin of the one man, Adam, with the gift of righteousness through the one man, Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:12-21). At the same time that Paul points toward the humanity of Jesus, he also confesses Jesus' divinity. As we noted above, in Romans 10:9, we find the earliest christological confession that "Jesus is Lord," and the source of our salvation. In 1 Corinthians 16:22, we encounter the phrase *maranatha*, which can be read in two different ways. When Paul wrote his letters in the Greek language, there was no formatting as we know it today—paragraphs, spaces between words, or punctuation—but simply one letter written after the other. To read Paul's original writing, then, requires us to make judgments about where to divide the letters into words and sentences. Most translations of the Bible will have footnotes to indicate uncertainties in the reading of a text. In the case of this word, *maranatha*, we find that the Greek could be read in two distinct ways: 1) as *marana tha* meaning "Our Lord, come!" or as 2) *maran atha*, which translates to "Our Lord has come!" Perhaps Paul intended to convey both meanings to suggest that Jesus has come and will come again, which is a reflection of his divine nature and purpose. Regardless of which way you might choose to interpret *maranatha*—and it requires us to make interpretive decisions—it is quite clear that Paul recognizes Jesus' lordship, that Jesus is God.

Have you noted that Paul is reflecting theologically on the meaning of Jesus Christ? He is providing not a historical account of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, but a theological statement of the meaning of Jesus for the lives of his followers. Paul is developing notions of Jesus as human and as God, but there is not yet present in his writings a fully developed doctrine of the two natures of Jesus. Nonetheless, his writings will form a crucial basis for later deliberations regarding the two natures: fully human, fully divine. As we continue with Paul's writings, you should notice how much we take for granted the meaning of his statements, though this clarity would not occur without centuries of church deliberations.

Paul's letters have much to say about the significance of the crucifixion. This act was not simply a mistaken execution, but an atonement or reconciliation for the sins of all humanity (Rom. 3:23-25). The sense of universal salvation for those who believe in Jesus is a crucial point in Paul's letters, since it meant that Israel was no longer singled out as God's chosen people. In Romans 10:12-13, Paul highlights that there is "no distinction between Jew and Greek" and "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved," which is a reinterpretation of the prophet Joel (2:32) in the context of Christ's crucifixion. For Paul, the cross is not only the source of salvation for all but a stumbling block for Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. We might say the crucifixion did not seem like the expected answer for either tradition. This sense of the universality of the atonement is repeated in Galatians 3:27-28, and elsewhere in Paul's letters, thus suggesting an important emphasis of Paul's emerging Christology. The salvific function of the cross is not limited to certain people, places, times, or conditions, but offered to all. Of course, later interpreters will debate and define how the saving power of the cross works, and what that offer to all actually means.

Hand-in-hand with the foolishness of the cross is the mystery of the resurrection, which stands as a second crucial emphasis in Paul's letters. He indicates that the atonement of the cross is not complete without the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:17), which overcomes death, the result of sin. For Paul, the resurrection is a promise and goal for those who are in Christ; it is the power of life (Phil. 3:10). The resurrection represents hope for those who take on the mind of Christ and join him in the sufferings of the world. Paul depicts the resurrection in terms of a present-future quality, an already-but-not-yet sense, as believers live with one foot in the kingdom of humanity and its brokenness and the other in the kingdom of God and its redemption. Christians are to await the return of Christ, who will complete the resurrection and the reconciliation of all things (1 Thess. 4:15-17). This

tension of the work of Christ completed, but not yet, is a constant theme in Paul's writings.

Let's turn now to the Gospel of John and its high Christology (emphasizing Christ's divinity) centered in the Word, the *logos* of God. The Greek word *logos* had a rich history of usage and multiple meanings in the ancient world, beyond what we can examine here. Generally, it referred to the spoken word, as in God speaking creation into existence (the Hebrew word *debar* reflects this sensibility), and to inward thought or the life of the mind. In John, Jesus Christ is the *logos*, the Word of God become flesh in the sense of both the inward thought and the outward expression. John tells us that "in the beginning was the Word" (1:1), which signifies Christ's pre-existence with God, rather than as a creation of God. Thus, John begins the process of identifying that the Word of God is fully present in Christ and accessible to those who believe in him.

We have considered some of the key christological ideas found in the letters of Paul and in the Gospel of John, in order to demonstrate how the scriptures begin the task of theological reflection. But of course, even if we included all the writings of the New Testament, we would still lack a fully formed Christology. The incompleteness of and, at times, differences in the scriptural witnesses led to the rise of various interpretations, which created divisions and debates in the early church as the doctrine developed.

THEOLOGICAL DEBATES ABOUT JESUS CHRIST IN THE EARLY CHURCH

In turning to the role of tradition in developing our understanding of both the person and work of Jesus Christ, we need to keep in mind this sense of diverse interpretations and the motivation to clarify or to respond to challenges. One of the first challenges came from Marcion, who is best known for arguing that the God of the Old Testament and the God of Christ in the New Testament were, in fact, two

different gods. Christologically, Marcion claimed that Jesus was not a true man and did not have a physical, material body—a position that was deemed heretical, and led to his expulsion from the church.

There were Gnostics, who taught spiritual redemption through knowledge rather than a bodily resurrection. Gnostics believed that Jesus brought knowledge for spiritual salvation, and that he only appeared to be human—a heresy known as Docetism. Though Gnostics were deemed heretics, their teachings caused the church to examine its Christology more closely, to consider if Jesus was actually fully human. Indeed, throughout the second and third centuries, there were debates about the meaning of Christ's work of salvation. The Gnostic position of sacred knowledge and spiritual salvation represents one position. A second view of Christ's nature and work is represented in Eastern Orthodoxy and articulates concerns for human *theosis* or deification (union with God). A third, early position viewed Jesus' work in terms of the forgiveness of sins or justification, which became the main soteriological thread in the West.

When the debates about the Trinity raged in the fourth century, Christology was one of the central concerns. How should Christians understand the relationship between God the Father and the Son? A number of solutions were offered. Some argued that Christ was a man who was adopted by God's Spirit at baptism or at another time, which is known as an adoptionist Christology. Sabellius introduced a modalistic Christology, which claimed that there were successive—but not simultaneous—manifestations of the Father, then the Son, and finally the Holy Spirit. There also arose a form of binitarian thinking or a Spirit Christology, which held there were only the Father and the Son-Spirit, thereby allowing a way for Jesus to be pre-existent. This Spirit Christology forced the church to consider the relationship of Jesus Christ to the Holy Spirit as well. Finally, as previously mentioned, the *logos* Christology emerged, locating the identity of Jesus Christ in the *logos* (word) and in the title Son of God. But the Son of God

language led Arius to introduce the idea that Jesus was a creature, albeit the first among all creatures, but not God. Arianism was denounced at the first Council of Nicaea (325 CE).

This brief and incomplete depiction of early christological debates suggests that there was not a clear, universally agreed-upon idea of the nature or identity of Jesus Christ. It took centuries of debate, the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon and others to resolve the doctrine of the two natures of Jesus Christ, fully divine and fully human, which we hold today. But even in our own time, many people continue to question and ask about the nature of Jesus Christ, which means we need to exercise care in recognizing that our beliefs may not be as rigidly fixed as some might think. After all, how do you explain one who is fully divine dying on the cross? That he only appeared to be human? That his humanity was emptied out at that point? That it is a paradox and central mystery of the Christian faith? In addition, we recognize the important task of making our theology and Christology meaningful in each day and age, by articulating it anew for our own generation.

CRUCIFIXION, INCARNATION, AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST

The classic Christology confirmed by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE (two natures: fully divine and fully human) continued through the Middle Ages, though theories of atonement came to the forefront. In other words, with the disputes about the nature of Jesus Christ more or less settled, the work of Jesus Christ came under increasing scrutiny. How is the crucifixion effective in the forgiveness of sins? How is it that we are reconciled to God through Christ's death on the cross? Does the problem lie in the powers of evil, which must be overcome? Is there something within the human being that must be changed? Why do we need the crucifixion anyway? The easiest way to remember the meaning of *atonement* is simply to divide the word into at-one-ment or the notion of reconciliation between God

and humanity. The crucifixion, of course, is situated in the context of the Old Testament understanding of the sacrificial system of Israel. To atone for one's sins, the high priest would offer a sacrifice to God. In this context, Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world begins to take on its meaning. Several theologians, including Anselm and Abelard, offered explanations about how the atonement actually works to provide justification (forgiveness) and restoration.

The prevailing theory in the early church has been called the *Christus Victor* or ransom theory of atonement. This theory holds that there is essentially a cosmic battle taking place between the good God and the evil forces of the world. It's a theme we see played out regularly in movies and literature such as the Harry Potter series by J. K. Rowling. This ransom theory suggests that humanity is in bondage to the forces of evil. When God was disguised in the form of a human, Jesus of Nazareth, these evil forces were tricked into seeing him as easy prey rather than God, which enabled Christ's death to defeat evil and free humanity from its grip. Jesus became the ransom for us.

You can probably come up with a number of questions that make this theory seem less than adequate. For example, does this theory represent a form of docetism in which Jesus only appears to be human? What about the fact that evil and sin continue to exist in our world? How, then, did the crucifixion defeat the forces of evil? And what about our free will and our responsibility for choices we make? Does this cosmic battle suggest that we have no role in or responsibility for our actions? These are just some of the questions we might raise, and perhaps you can think of yet others that show the weaknesses in the ransom model. While this first model clearly demonstrates the sense of a cosmic drama between forces of good and evil, which seems true to our human experience, there are unsettled questions that remain.

In the Medieval Era, Anselm proposed a second theory of atonement commonly referred to as the satisfaction theory, which is still

widely held by many Christians. Essentially, this theory suggests that human beings have disobeyed God and, as a result, God must be satisfied (think of this as the payment of a debt). If not satisfied, then punishment is due. Because sin is endless and only God can provide satisfaction for humanity, God thus became human so that in Jesus' perfect obedience, the satisfaction due to God could be rendered and human sins forgiven. In this theory, once again, we encounter unsettled questions. The logic of God satisfying God by giving God's self seems peculiar in some ways. Couldn't God just erase that debt? And isn't grace free and unconditional? What about the fact that God is love? Shouldn't a God who is love have a better way to restore humanity than through violence and death? While there are many questions that surround the satisfaction theory of atonement, this view takes seriously sin and its consequences, as well as the human inability to adequately atone for our misdeeds.

A third atonement theory, moral influence, was first put forth by Abelard. This theory takes seriously the notion that in Christ and the cross, God's love is displayed in such a dramatic and convincing manner that human beings are inspired to follow Jesus' example. This theory thus suggests the atonement that takes place on the cross must be appropriated by faith if it is to be completed. Unlike the satisfaction theory, which requires the sacrifice of Jesus to fulfill the debt owed to God, the moral influence theory emphasizes the love of God and the human response to grace. The example provided by Jesus on the cross fundamentally changes something within us, and we are thus moved to live differently. Of course, we should also note that in the Modern Era, the moral influence theory tended to stress the humanity of Jesus as a good example and to promote the idea of human moral perfection through reason. Yet this theory also has its weaknesses. We might ask about the power of sin and whether moral influence is strong enough to break that grip. And what about the presence of evil in the world? Is a good example sufficient to counteract the reality

of evil? Nonetheless, the emphasis on God's love in Jesus Christ is a compelling way to articulate the salvific work of Christ.

Ultimately, all atonement theories fall short in our understanding. Some time ago I participated in a worship service at the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas. In his sermon, Pastor Adam Hamilton brought to light atonement theories, then proposed that the cross should be thought of as poetry or art more than as intellectual and definitive theory. The work of the cross draws us in and speaks to our lives, but it remains an unsolved mystery. We can't fully comprehend what Christ has done for us in and through the crucifixion. Christians believe that the death of Jesus Christ on the cross has the power to reconcile us to God and to one another. Of course, Jesus' final words, "It is finished," leave us with a question mark, for we recognize that we still live in a world in which sin and evil are pervasive. All is finished, yet it is not finished. Even those who try to follow Christ cannot always do the right thing or avoid suffering and pain. Death remains our destiny. Human nature has not yet been fully recreated. But these words and the cross hold before us the powerful promise that God has become flesh in Jesus in order that we might be forgiven, reconciled, and restored to right and radical relationship. Even so, we are left to reflect upon the cross, its foolishness as well as its incomprehensibility as the means of our forgiveness.

Having introduced the crucifixion, which is a central doctrine of the Christian faith, we now turn to an overview of the incarnation and the resurrection, since without the incarnation the crucifixion lacks power and without the resurrection death is not overcome. Indeed, the church's highest holy days are those celebrating the incarnation (Christmas) and the resurrection (Easter). On one side of the cross stands the doctrine of the incarnation, in which we claim that the one God has become embodied in the world in Jesus Christ. The Gospel of John tells us that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (1:14). The incarnation is a reality that must be taken on faith, for the idea

that Jesus Christ could be fully human and at the same time fully divine is a paradox. There is no logical explanation, no way for human reason to make sense of this reality. Even so, the incarnation tells us several important things about God and humanity. For one, the fact that God took on human flesh indicates that the material world, including the human body, is not inherently bad or evil. Indeed, in the first creation story in Genesis, God declares the creation and the human creature to be good. This claim is significant given the number of theologies over the centuries that have denied or denigrated physicality and the human body. Further, when we consider atonement theories, clearly the incarnation represents the initial point at which the reconciliation of God and humanity occurs. In this one historical person and moment, God and humanity are in perfect and right relationship. Third, the incarnation suggests to us that our God is not a distant, uncaring one, but rather that God understands our lives and world intimately. Perhaps in your own reflection on the incarnation, you can think of other meaningful claims that can be made beyond the story we tell at Advent and Christmas about the child in the manger.

On the other side of the cross stands the resurrection, which is central to the Gospels and the letters of Paul, and is the very heartbeat of Christian faith. While we often emphasize the cross, even wearing it as a symbol around our necks, the empty tomb breaks open the crucifixion by overcoming death and bringing new life and the promise of the new creation to all. Perhaps we should all be wearing empty tombs around our necks. The resurrection stands as the central symbol of hope in the face of the violence and brokenness of the world and our lives. When we speak of the resurrection we are first and foremost referring to the resurrection of Jesus to life following his death on the cross at Calvary. The resurrection of Jesus is the central symbol of the Christian year, as every Sunday when the church gathers in worship, it is the celebration of a “mini-Easter,” recognition that Jesus has conquered death and offered new life, abundant life. The resurrection

stands before us as a constant reminder that death does not have the final word and that God is a God of life. The resurrection gives shape to our lives and our faith with its emphasis on the hope and promises of God. In this way, the resurrection also points to the new life given to believers when they accept the gift of faith. In a spiritual sense, we are resurrected, given new life, even though the physical resurrection, the resurrection of the body, remains as a distant hope. That notion of physical resurrection after death is, of course, shrouded in mystery. We do not know what we shall become, and of course, there is no historical evidence to which we can turn in order to substantiate the resurrection of Jesus Christ upon which we stake this belief. It is a claim we accept by faith. We hold fast to the claim of life beyond death, which gives us the hope and the strength to live fully and confidently.

WHO IS JESUS CHRIST FOR US TODAY?

As we approach the end of this introduction to the doctrine of Jesus Christ, we come full circle to the question: Who is Jesus Christ for us today? For most Christians, when asked this question of the identity of Jesus Christ, the answer will be the Son of God, the Messiah, the Savior, the Lord. Some might simply say all we need to know is that "Jesus loves me." If we return to the woman beside us at the Habitat for Humanity house, telling her that "Jesus loves you" probably won't answer her questions, though the love of Jesus Christ can be compelling in a world that often seems loveless. One of the unfortunate christological turns in recent decades has been the tendency to turn Jesus Christ into "my personal Lord and Savior," when the tradition has always emphasized that salvation is located within the church-community and that right relationship is not simply about one person's reconciliation to God, but the interweaving of all believers in right relationship with God and one another. The modern mind-set with its individualistic emphasis has warped the communal depth of

the meaning of Jesus Christ. This radical relationship or communal, even cosmic quality is a teaching that should be stressed as central to our Christology.

In response to your co-laborer on that Saturday afternoon, theology would also posit, traditionally, that salvation is the act of being saved from the consequences of sin, which are suffering and death, and the going to heaven, which is life after death. These are the marks of the crucifixion and resurrection. But salvation has a deeper meaning still, and in today's world, salvation expressed in traditional terms may not be as compelling as it once was. If we wish to speak meaningfully to this woman who is open to conversation, we might need to carefully choose our language and way of expressing who Jesus Christ is and what he does. So how might we articulate the meaning of Christ's work of salvation, his crucifixion and resurrection, in ways that are faithful to Christian teaching and meaningful to contemporary ears?

A theological move toward relevance might begin with understanding the word *salvation*, and its genesis. Salvation comes from the Latin *salvus*, meaning well, safe, sound, unharmed, saved. The word has many nuances and is not translated into English simply as "saved," at least in the sense that is often bandied about among contemporary Christians. "Are you saved?" they ask, in what is often an oversimplification or soon leads to some comment about going to heaven. To speak of being well, safe, and sound leads us toward an understanding of wholeness that is supported by the biblical concept of *shalom* or peace. Often we think of peace as the absence of conflict, but the biblical concept is one of healing and wholeness. It points toward the fullness of life. Thus, when the resurrected Jesus appears to the disciples, breathes on them, and says, "Peace be with you" (Luke 24:36; John 20:21, 26), he is offering them *shalom*, healing and wholeness. Here we encounter the most profound meaning of Jesus Christ and who he is and remains for us today: The one who brings healing and

wholeness so that all human beings may receive abundant life, may be healed and whole in the here and now as well as the hereafter. The fullness of life is offered to us by Jesus Christ. So then, who is Jesus Christ for us today? What would you tell the woman who seeks to know more?

As United Methodists, our doctrinal standards offer a traditional understanding of Jesus Christ in terms of his person and his work of salvation. Article II of the Confession of Faith provides a basic synopsis:

We believe in Jesus Christ, truly God and truly man, in whom the divine and human Natures are perfectly and inseparably united. He is the eternal Word made flesh, the only Begotten Son of the Father, born of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. As Ministering Servant, he lived, suffered and died on the cross. He was buried, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven to be with the Father, from whence he shall return. He is eternal Savior and Mediator, who intercedes for us, and by him all men will be judged.

Article II goes hand-in-hand with “Article VIII—Reconciliation Through Christ,” which holds that the atonement is “a sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.” The Articles of Religion offer similar doctrinal stances, but also include a separate statement on the resurrection (see Article III).

Perhaps most significant for United Methodists is our understanding of the salvation that is offered in and through Jesus Christ (our soteriology); it departs from a number of denominations that adhere to a notion of “once saved, always saved.” For United Methodists, salvation is a lifelong, gradual process, dependent upon the constant presence and reception of grace. This process is referred to as either the *ordo salutis* (order of salvation) or, more often, the *via salutis* (way of salvation).

For Wesley, there is no singular moment of salvation, lasting a

lifetime, when we confess Christ and receive the gift of faith; rather, faith begins a lifelong journey that requires us to respond to God's grace day by day. In his first annual conference, Wesley notes that justification is "to be pardoned and received into God's favour and into such a state that, *if we continue therein*, we shall be finally saved."¹⁷ Indeed, Wesley believed there were instances of people who backslid into sin and abandoned the journey of salvation, though prevenient grace always encouraged them to begin again. He further notes, on Tuesday, June 26, 1744, that with the reception of faith, "salvation begins."¹⁸ Wesley's sermons help us to further clarify this gradual nature of salvation. In "On Working Out Our Own Salvation," representative of Wesley's mature thought, he claims that "experience, as well as Scripture, shows this salvation to be both instantaneous and gradual."¹⁹ He explains that salvation begins with prevenient grace, which implies "some tendency toward life, some degree of salvation"; it is carried on by repentance, then carried further by justification and sanctification, in which we are saved from the guilt of sin and the power of sin, respectively. Even so, we must "work out our own salvation" from the first moment we receive grace until our last breath, relying upon the gift of grace and growing into the fullness of love. Because God works in us, says Wesley, we can and must work out our salvation in response.

For Wesley, the key to working out our own salvation, the essence of continuing to receive God's gift of grace and to grow in faith and love, are the "Means of Grace." Because grace is resistible, in that God gives us the free will to choose to respond or not to the offer of grace, there are certain "channels" of grace, "outward signs, words, or actions ordained of God, and appointed for this end—to be the

¹⁷ John Wesley, 137, emphasis added.

¹⁸ Ibid., 140.

¹⁹ John Wesley's sermon "On Working Out Our Own Salvation," §II.1.

ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.”²⁰ These are the Christian practices that empower the healing of our sinful nature and the growth in holiness or the fullness of love. The Means of Grace include prayer (both individual and corporate); fasting; Christian conferencing (accountability groups); worship; Holy Communion; works of mercy; and reading, hearing, and meditating upon the scriptures. We might think of the Means of Grace as our intentionality toward God in order to grow in love (personal holiness) for the sake of our witness and service in the world (social holiness).

Salvation, then, from a United Methodist perspective is a lifelong process or a journey, fueled by our desire for God and our reception of grace, and concluded only when we reach the end of our human life. The minutes of the Third Annual Conference, Tuesday May 13, 1746, emphasize:

- A. In asserting salvation by faith we mean this:
 - 1. That pardon (salvation begun) is received by faith producing works;
 - 2. That holiness (salvation continued) is faith working by love;
 - 3. That heaven (salvation finished) is the reward of this faith.²¹

Every day we must work out our own salvation because God is at work in us and in the world. Randy Maddox concludes that “the overall dynamics of salvation retained a gradual nature, and more important, the fundamental goal of salvation remained therapeutic transformation.”²² Salvation, at heart, is about healing and wholeness in this life and the life beyond.

20 John Wesley’s sermon “The Means of Grace,” §II.1.

21 “The Third Annual Conference,” *John Wesley*. 159.

22 Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 154.

■ I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

Our doctrine of God is not complete until we have considered the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. Yet, as feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson has claimed, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, pneumatology, tends to be neglected in theological reflection, both historically and in the contemporary era. Even so, the Spirit (or Spirit-Sophia, as Johnson names the third person) is “nothing less than the mystery of God’s personal engagement with the world.”²³ More than that, says Johnson, “Forgetting the Spirit is not ignoring a faceless, shadowy third hypostasis but the mystery of God closer to us than we are to ourselves, drawing near and passing by in quickening, liberating compassion.”²⁴ As we begin to engage the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, it is worth considering whether you have tended to forget the Holy Spirit, to emphasize Jesus and God, but not the Spirit in all its fullness. How have you known and spoken of this expression of God’s very self? It is important to remember that the Holy Spirit is God, not a creation of or emanation from God. In our doctrine of the economic Trinity, the Holy Spirit represents one of the three ways that God has chosen to be made known and at work in our world. When we turn to the scriptures, we readily find the Spirit’s movement and presence in and among us.

The Hebrew Scriptures first speak of the Spirit or *ruach* (wind, breath, spirit) in the creation narrative, as a “wind from God” that sweeps across the formless face of the waters as God begins to create the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:2). The Spirit is also represented as breath (though the breathing of life into the earth creature, *adam*, is a different Hebrew word), an image that provides us with a sense of the Spirit’s life-giving quality. From the very beginning, then, the Spirit is revealed in terms of God’s power and enlivening

23 Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 131.

24 Ibid.

presence. The *ruach* is found in the Psalms and the prophets, usually referred to as the Spirit of God, and only in Psalm 51:11 and Isaiah 63:10-11, do we find the Hebrew writers speaking of the “holy” spirit. In the New Testament, the Greek word *pneuma* continues this trajectory of the Spirit as the power and life-giving presence of God. The Spirit again is revealed as the power of God and the giver of life at work in the world, bringing to reality the promised new creation, but also serving as comforter and advocate in the midst of this already-but-not-yet existence.

There are a variety of ways in which theologians have described the Holy Spirit, but these descriptions almost always point toward the Spirit’s work or mission among us in the world. This emphasis on the work of the Spirit makes sense given that we cannot know God in God’s self (the inner relationship of the immanent Trinity). In every case, the Spirit looms as a relational reality drawing us into the work and presence of God, as well as creating a bond among people of faith. Turning again to Elizabeth Johnson, the Holy Spirit’s activities might be referred to as: 1) vivifying, 2) renewing and empowering, and 3) gracing.

To speak of the “vivifying” activity of the Holy Spirit, we are pointed toward its creative power in the sense of *creatio continua* or ongoing, continuous creation. What a wonderful, descriptive word Johnson has chosen in her use of “vivifying.” To vivify is to give life, to animate, to make more vivid or, we might say, to make more fully alive. Johnson demonstrates how our language about God, well chosen, can deepen our understanding and add to our reflective engagement. In speaking about the Holy Spirit’s work of vivification, we come to see that God not only gives life by means of the Spirit; but God offers the fullness of life, a sense of becoming more than merely a living being with the breath of life. Through the Holy Spirit we are enabled to become fully alive, fully the people God created us to be: filled with love (think: sanctification), compassion, kindness, justice, generosity, and so forth.

To go one step farther, in *The Spirit of Life*, Jürgen Moltmann argues that the Holy Spirit is the enlivening presence and power within Jesus Christ himself. By analogy, the work of the Holy Spirit creates in us a more Christ-like character, enabling us to become more fully human. This is, indeed, vivifying.

In Johnson's depiction, the second activity of the Holy Spirit is a "transforming energy" of renewal and empowerment in the face of the world's brokenness.²⁵ In other words, the Holy Spirit provides the power for renewing and recreating people, the earth, even political and economic systems. Of course, this is not to suggest that human beings can take a passive role in this process, but that the Holy Spirit provides the energy and direction so that we might engage in the process of God's mission in the world. We do not need to look far to see the brokenness of the world, its hatred, violence, and suffering. Many people feel fragmented, untethered, and without a way to pull the scattered pieces of their lives into a meaningful and life-giving wholeness. For Christians, the source of this transformation, the glue if you will, is the Holy Spirit. Paul Tillich expressed well this notion of finding unity amid the brokenness of existence, by correlating the existential question of fragmentation and ambiguity with the theological answer of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit, God's transforming energy, brings together the shattered and scattered pieces of human life into a meaningful whole.

Johnson names the third function of the Holy Spirit as "gracing." Grace, of course, is the unmerited love of God that is freely given to us. That grace is the presence of God, ever with us, whether or not we are conscious of the Spirit's presence. But even more, we find that the gracing activity of the Spirit includes the giving of gifts. These are not material gifts, as might be proclaimed by a prosperity gospel in a false interpretation of the scriptural witnesses. Rather, the gifts of the Spirit are given for mutual upbuilding, for the sake of the

²⁵ Ibid., 135.

community and its life in God. This gift-giving is articulated by Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians: “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (12:4-7). In this passage, we discover that the one body has many persons differently gifted by the Spirit, but each is an essential part of the whole. Indeed, it is the Spirit that chooses which gift is made manifest in which person and thus prevents anyone from boasting in his or her own capacities or from assuming a superior place by virtue of supposedly greater gifts. The gifting work of the Spirit serves an equalizing purpose among the faithful, encouraging us to resist comparing ourselves and our contributions to others.

This gracing activity of the Holy Spirit is also seen in the “fruit of the Spirit” described in Galatians 5:22-26. Here again the equalizing quality of the Holy Spirit comes to the forefront. The passage begins with an admonition to reject the desires of the flesh, which requires some careful exegesis in order to prevent us from pitting the “flesh” against the “spirit” in a way that diminishes the goodness of God’s created order in favor of a spiritualized interpretation. If we live in the presence of the Spirit’s gracing activity, the Spirit will guide us into a life that manifests in expressions of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—things that cannot be purchased, consumed, stored away for safe keeping, or owned. Another text that offers a glimpse of the fruit of the Spirit is Acts 2:43-47, in which we are told that

all who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and

generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.

In other words, when we open ourselves to the Spirit, we find that the life of God takes up residence within us, and this indwelling gifts us with Christ-like-ness.

UNITED METHODIST UNDERSTANDING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

How does the United Methodist understanding of the Holy Spirit fit into this discussion? In many ways, John Wesley and United Methodists would find an affinity with Elizabeth Johnson's characterization of the Holy Spirit as vivifying, renewing and empowering, and gracing. Article III of the Confession of Faith begins with an affirmation of the Holy Spirit as one with the Father and the Son. It continues to assert that the Holy Spirit "convinces the world of sin, of righteousness and of judgment," leads us through "a faithful response to the gospel in the fellowship of the Church," and "comforts, sustains and empowers the faithful." We also find in both the Articles of Religion and the Confession of Faith a statement on the work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification. Indeed, Wesley understood the Holy Spirit as an "empowering Presence in our lives."²⁶

For Wesley, there was yet another significant dimension of the Holy Spirit: the witness of the Spirit or its role in assurance. Most simply, the Spirit of God testifies inwardly to our Spirit that we are children of God, and the "immediate result of this testimony is 'the fruit of the Spirit'; namely, 'love, joy, peace; longsuffering, gentleness, goodness.'"²⁷ The emphasis here should be on God's work in the Holy Spirit and not the experience of the believer; that is, it is God's work that is definitive. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, we are assured

²⁶ Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 119.

²⁷ See John Wesley's sermon "The Witness of the Spirit, Discourse II," §II.1.

of our faith and our adoption as children of God, exhibit fruit of God's work within us, receive gifts for the common good, and are guided by the Spirit.

THE HOLY SPIRIT GAVE BIRTH TO THE CHURCH

While there is much more that could be said about the Holy Spirit and its work or mission, we will conclude with one additional and significant action: its birthing of the church, the community of believers. The book of Acts begins with the followers of Jesus receiving his command to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit. The disciples commit themselves to waiting, praying, and staying together. Then, on the day of Pentecost, the sound "like the rush of a violent wind" fills the house and the Spirit enables them to speak and hear in multiple languages. At Babel, God had "confused" language, scattering the people into a state of disunity (Gen. 11); though we might suggest that Babel also represents the development of the world's diversity, whose fragmentary quality finds its unity and oneness only in and through the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit does not act so as to make all people the same, but instead acts to bring a sense of unity in the midst of diversity. Thus, the birth of the church at Pentecost provides us with the crucial insight that sameness is not the goal of life in the Spirit, but rather a unity and togetherness expressed in the midst of great diversity. There is, of course, more to be said about the church, which we will take up in the following section on ecclesiology.

I BELIEVE IN THE CHURCH

The church is a rather peculiar entity. What other voluntary organization brings people together on a weekly basis, collects money from them, and then redistributes (ideally) that money to care for others in God's name? In many places, this organization is declining in our

contemporary society, which is dominated by individualism and consumeristic aspirations. Seen from this perspective, the church is, or should be, a distinctly countercultural reality. Yet, at the same time, the church is located in the midst of the surrounding culture, facing all the same issues as the society. Many non-Christians critique the church and its members as being hypocritical. We don't seem particularly perfect. We seem to be interested in people's money. Every week we read of battles among the Christian faithful around various social issues; we certainly don't seem to be less divided than our society. So what is the church? How would you begin to talk about why you believe in the value and validity of the church, and how would you do so in a way that distinguishes it from other groups and organizations? No doubt, there is a great need to provide meaningful expressions of the church to a society that increasingly considers itself "spiritual but not religious." So how would you begin to explain the church and your commitment to this peculiar institution to a Millennial, for example, who feels that all institutions are suspect, self-serving, and not worthy of his or her participation? This question is an important one in today's society and any Christian, lay or clergy, should have a thoughtful response to offer.

What does it mean to say we believe in the church? On the one hand, the church is an institution of human making, beset with all the problems faced by any human institution. It should not surprise us, then, that people will view the church as hypocritical, unloving at times, and judgmental. The church is all those things and more. Centuries ago, Saint Augustine answered similar charges with his claim that the church is a hospital for sinners. The church remains a reflection of the world's brokenness. But on the other hand, the church is also a mystical, spiritual community in which the new creation, reconciliation, and restoration are actually present, if only in part. The church, as a spiritual reality, has the power to participate in the transformation of the world. We should never lose sight of this both/

and character of the church. So, with this tension in mind, let's begin to unpack the meaning and substance of the church, the doctrine of ecclesiology.

The Hebrew Scriptures provide the background to the church as a community of God's people who gather together to worship and conduct their lives in relationship to and in covenant with God. Long before the church as we know it existed, the people of Israel were in relationship to God, though the shape of the communal life evolved over time. Walter Brueggemann has suggested that the Old Testament depicts three phases in Israel's self-understanding, and each phase relates to a particular context or situation in which it found itself.²⁸

The first communal expression, the Pre-monarchic Model or the time from Moses to King David (1250–1000 BCE), Brueggemann equates to a "new church start." Much like a new church start today, they were establishing their life in God, planting their community apart from the power structures and prevailing institutions of Egypt, and forming an alternative community. This community of God's people was also socioeconomically marginalized. It did not have great resources and capacity, but depended "on the movement of the Spirit to give energy, courage, and power."²⁹ Brueggemann also speaks of this pre-monarchic people as a "wilderness" community.

The second form of community is the Monarchic Model, which is the Old Testament model of Israel that dominates our thinking. From 1000 BCE up to 587 BCE, the royal monarchy of David represented the height of Israel's glory. In this model, the church and state are united, which approximates a modern-day faith community or an established and culturally legitimized church. It has a temple, a

28 Walter Brueggemann, "Rethinking Church Models through Scripture," *Theology Today* 48, no. 2 (July 1, 1991): 128–38.

29 Ibid., 132.

professional priesthood, kings who take seriously the covenant with God, and prophets who speak to the powerful when correction is needed. Brueggemann goes further in suggesting that this is the prevailing model of the church in the West, and for Israel, the dissolution of this period came as a result of the people's failure to be obedient to God or live in a manner acceptable to God. Perhaps there is some parallel to be found in the decline of the contemporary church.

But there is yet a third model that Brueggemann sees in the Old Testament: the Post-Exilic Model. This expression begins with the Babylonian exile in 587 BCE and continues through the return to Palestine and the creation of the second temple in the first century BCE. At this point, the people of Israel did not have influence over the government; they tended toward cultural syncretism that eroded their unique identity; and they developed strategies for survival, including the recovery of memory, the practice of hope, and the centrality of the sacred texts. Brueggemann argues that the sacred texts served to preserve the people's identity and allowed for imaginative practices that enabled them to remain distinct from the Persians and Greeks.

What do these Old Testament models of the community of faith suggest to us today? First, as we come to recognize the shifting nature of Israel's communal and covenantal identity, we see that faith communities evolve and respond to changing circumstances. The scriptures testify to the historical and contextual nature of our life in God and the need to preserve that covenant even in the midst of sweeping changes. Second, these models press us to consider the ways in which the faith community was not a central force in the sociopolitical scheme of things for much of its history. Even when those in power did not value or share Israel's identity as a people of God, the Israelites found ways to survive, practice hope, and keep alive the memory of this sacred history. This is not unlike our situation in Western

Christianity today. Third, we should not miss the importance of the sacred texts as a source of identity and of ongoing interpretation and reinterpretation of our faithfulness to God, as well as how that faithfulness is expressed in communal ways and through institutions. When we read the scriptures, we begin to see that the community of faith has taken different shapes and forms in remaining faithful to God during times of historical change and transition.

The New Testament word for the church—though neither used by Jesus nor prominent in the Gospels—is *ecclesia*, the gathered community that follows Christ. Originally, this Greek word was used to refer to a political assembly of Greek citizens, but it took on new meaning among the Christian faithful. Now it refers to those who are called out of the world by God and into the assembly in Christ; it is a coming together of the faithful. Despite this definition, in the New Testament the images and representations of the church are many and varied.

In his classic work *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, Paul Minear identified almost a hundred different images used to describe the church. Certainly, some of them are more prominent than others, but these images serve to shape our understanding of the church and our identity as a people gathered in the name of Christ. What images or phrases do you typically use to speak of the church? No matter how prominent or correct a model may seem in our minds, the New Testament never fully develops any of the images of the church. The church is a complex reality and, much like our language about God, our language about the church is inadequate to fully express its nature and purpose. We should also keep in mind that our understanding or models of the community of faith acquire a certain authenticity within the context of a particular generation. No doubt, the way one model or image was understood in the year 500 is not precisely the same as we might view it today. In this short overview, we will consider just three of the prominent New Testament images of

the church: 1) the body of Christ, 2) the community of salvation, and 3) the community of the Spirit.

BODY OF CHRIST

The image of the *body of Christ* is based upon 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 (also Rom. 12; Eph. 4) and may be the most frequently invoked language for the church:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. . . .

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (12:12-14, 27)

This is an organic, embodied, incarnational image of the church as a living breathing organism. It has many different members or parts, all of whom are required for the good functioning and well-being of the body. And more than that, this image portrays the church as the very presence of Christ in the world. The implications are clear: we are not to be hidden away in a building or inwardly focused, but actively going out into the world to represent Christ. As Karl Barth claimed, “the Church exists for the sake of the world, that the light is shining in the darkness.”³⁰ The church exists for its witness and mission in the world. Of course, the body of Christ is not just one’s own congregation, but is the whole of the people of God, the communion of saints both living and those that have passed the threshold of bodily death. So the body of Christ is an image that represents the incarnation, the Word become flesh, the embodied presence of the living Christ in the world.

30 Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 32.

COMMUNITY OF SALVATION

A second important New Testament image for the church is the *community of salvation*. Think of this as a living representation in continuity with the crucifixion of Christ. We claim that Christ died for our salvation, and the church continues to represent or re-present this salvific action. The church is where the sacraments (outward, visible signs of inward, spiritual grace) are administered. Baptism, which incorporates us into the church, is, among other things, the washing away of sin and rising into new life, with the promise of eternal life. Holy Communion, also called the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper, is a repeatable act of worship in which we, again, represent the salvation in Christ to all who are gathered. Traditionally, Christians have claimed that there is no salvation outside the church, as first stated by Cyprian in the third century. To be incorporated into the church by faith and baptism is to receive the offer and promise of salvation, though we also believe that in the church are both wheat and chaff, sheep and goats, the good fish and the bad in the same net. Thus, salvation is present within the church, but being present in the church is not a guarantee of salvation.

In contemporary theology, the church as the locus of salvation has undergone scrutiny, especially in relation to a pluralistic society. In other words, many now ask: is salvation found only in Christ? If you answer yes to this question, you would hold an exclusivist position of salvation given only to believers in Christ. Yet, if we begin to reflect upon the meaning of being "in Christ," this claim might not be as straightforward as we would initially think. Consider the fact that Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a traditional theologian in many ways, had a deep desire to visit India to meet Gandhi and to find where "Christ" is present in the East. Maybe Bonhoeffer held a position of inclusivism, which would suggest that the Christian revelation is definitive, but followers of other religions may still receive salvation. We cannot be

certain what Bonhoeffer intended by his hope to discover Christ in the East, but it seems clear that he did not expect to find the same understanding of Christ that dominates Western ecclesiology. If you answer that there are many paths leading to the same destination that is God, you would adhere to a position of pluralism. Of course, you could also argue for a position that suggests there are multiple, parallel paths leading to different destinations—all of which might be valid trajectories to wholeness.

So where do you stand on the question of salvation outside the Christian church, and why do you find that particular position most persuasive? Does the church play a significant role in your understanding of where salvation is found? Is it the church as institution or spiritual reality that dominates your thinking? The church can be understood as the community of salvation, as the place—or a place—where redemption in Christ is offered again and again. The church, in this sense, takes on the form of the crucifixion, as the location of our salvation. Remember, salvation points toward wholeness, toward the fullness of life seeping into our pores and enlivening our cells and molecules. So the church as the community of salvation indicates entering into the suffering of the world and engendering life in the face of death.

COMMUNITY OF THE SPIRIT

A third prominent New Testament image of the church is the *community of the Spirit*, which we can connect to the resurrection or the resurrected life. Returning to the text of Acts 2, and the story of Pentecost, the central or initiating action is the giving of the Spirit to the whole community, forming the community into one body. Saint Augustine referred to the Holy Spirit as the bond of love, not only within the Trinity, but also among believers within the Christian community. Without the Holy Spirit, the church remains a collection of separate

individuals, but in the Spirit, we become rightly and radically related. In this third image, the church is the community of the Spirit, a resurrected people given new life in the Spirit.

Now, these three images of the church have a christological shape: incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, which suggests that the head, heart, life, energy, existence of the church is in and through Christ and his acts on our behalf and in the presence of the Holy Spirit. The church is God's community, more so than it is our own community, at least as a spiritual reality, which brings us to recognize that there are always tensions related to being the church, a point we alluded to earlier. Let's look briefly at two primary tensions that always exist for us as Christians: 1) the spiritual and sociological and 2) the communal and personal.

THE VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE CHURCH

As noted at the outset of this section, the church always lives in the tension of being both a creation of God's—empowered by the Holy Spirit, formed by the acts of Jesus Christ—and, simultaneously, a broken, misguided human institution. Sometimes this is referred to in terms of the invisible and visible church. It is the difference between being a spiritual reality (that is, an expression of the very life of God in the world—in all the mystery of the divine) and a sociological reality, a human construction. Of course, we are always simultaneously both of these, and the church as a gathered people requires both the spiritual and the institutional dimensions to exist. We are the resurrected people, incorporated into Christ's body and offered the gift of salvation. Yet we are also people who have one foot in the old creation, sometimes bickering with one another, sometimes seeking to maintain the bureaucracy we have created as if it is God's own bureaucracy. The church lives in the tension of the spiritual and sociological and the goal is to find a balance between the two realities.

Christian faith always has a second tension, which is the tension between the communal nature of our faith and the personal journey of discipleship. When we believe in Christ, we are inescapably incorporated into the church as a spiritual reality. Right relationship and reconciliation are by nature communal. I like to use the image of Christ as a magnet and each person as a sliver of metal. With Christ at the center, we are all drawn to, attached to one another, jumbled together as one body around Christ. The reality of God in Christ in the Holy Spirit is radically relational. *Radical* means “to the roots” or as it was in the beginning and is promised to be in the new creation. But at the same time, the journey of faith must be taken individually. I cannot believe for you or you for me. Each of us must make the faith decision alone with God. And each of us must constantly throw down our nets, security nets, nets that entangle us, whatever they may be, so that we might continue to participate in the life of faith and in the church. We have no choice but to live in this tension between the communal and the personal and find a balance between the two.

MARKS OF THE CHURCH

There are a few other dimensions of the church and ecclesiology that are important theological concerns, most notably the four “marks” of the church: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. When we proclaim that there is “one” church, we are pointing toward the unity of all believers, despite our denominational differences and even schism between Catholic and Protestant or Eastern and Western Christianity. We are all one in Christ. Of course, the boundaries of who is considered “in” and who is thought to be “out” depend upon where you stand in the Christian tradition. Although the unity seems tenuous in human terms, the church as God’s community of faithful is nonetheless characterized by a real, albeit elusive oneness.

We, secondly, refer to the church as “holy.” I have sometimes

been struck by the entry on “holy” in *A New Handbook of Christian Theology*, edited by Musser and Price; the entry simply states, “See God.” Indeed, there is something profound, if unintentional, in this directive to “see God” if we want to understand the meaning of holiness. Sometimes holiness is regarded as a condition of moral righteousness and integrity, and while it is that, holiness must be considered a far richer term, if we are directed to God as the source and definition of the concept. To speak of holiness is to point toward the fullness of love in keeping with the scriptural notion that God is love (1 John 4:8). The holiness of the church, then, consists in being set apart by God and to the service of God (a concept rooted in the Old Testament). It also suggests being in right relationship with God, and thus able to embody in greater measure and share widely God’s own love.

The third mark of the church is its catholicity or universality. The problem with this word, of course, is that many people understand “catholic” to mean the “Roman Catholic Church,” which leads them to revise the Apostles’ Creed to read, “the holy universal Church” rather than “the holy catholic church.” The universality of the church indicates that it encompasses all times, all peoples, and all places. There are no geographical or physical boundaries to the church, no limits to where it exists and who may participate. There is one church numerically, but in its universality it is unbounded and reaches across time and space. At times, of course, the institutional church has created boundaries and excluded people based upon race, language, and other characteristics. Even so, the catholicity of the church remains undiminished in the sight of God.

Finally, we point to the apostolic nature of the church. Apostolicity is a disputed concept. For Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, it refers to a traceable relationship to the original followers (apostles) of Jesus. For Protestants, it tends to mean a relationship to the apostolic witnesses and teachings found in the New Testament.

For the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, apostolic succession provides their priests and churches with a direct line of authority stretching back to the laying on of hands by the original apostles. From this basis of authority, these churches claim to be the true church. In the Protestant context, however, apostolicity is viewed more broadly in terms of those who follow the teachings of the apostles passed on through the scriptural witnesses and inspired by the Holy Spirit as the true mark of the church. Despite the differences in understanding apostolicity, the point is the same: the church finds its origin and continuance in the witnesses to Jesus Christ and the handing down of those teachings.

UNITED METHODIST BELIEFS ABOUT THE CHURCH

For United Methodists, the Confession of Faith, Article V, provides a basic understanding of ecclesiology: “We believe the Christian Church is the community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ. We believe it is one, holy, apostolic, and catholic. It is the redemptive fellowship in which the Word of God is preached . . . , and the sacraments are duly administered. . . . Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit the Church exists for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers and the redemption of the world.” Likewise, the Articles of Religion, Article XIII, point toward the faithful gathered where the “Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments duly administered.” This phrase is a common ecclesial understanding among Protestants and would have been held by John Wesley, for whom the institutional church remained the Church of England. Maddox suggests that Wesley “construed the essence of the church in terms of its contribution to God’s redemptive purpose of transforming human life.”³¹ Central to this transformation was participation in common

31 Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 241.

worship and small groups that provided support and accountability. The church, for Wesley, “must be holy in the fuller sense of nurturing—and expecting—the progressive holiness of each of its members.”³² Of course, holiness includes both the inward love of God and the outward love of neighbor.

Today’s United Methodists follow a Wesleyan understanding in which the “communal forms of faith . . . not only promote personal growth; they also equip and mobilize us for mission and service in the world.”³³ The church, as Christ’s body in the world, is sent out in mission and service. Thus there remains this sense of both transforming the individual believer through participating in the church and transforming the world through mission and service. Ideally, mission and service will be in balance with worship and small-group accountability.

Once again, there is much more that we could say about the church. It might be helpful at this point for you to reflect upon your understanding of the church, the images you use and the characteristics that form its fundamental identity. If the Millennial generation, those who are under thirty, tends to hold a dim view of institutions, how might you offer an image or vision of the church as much more than a human institution, but without denying its flawed and broken character? In today’s society, a clear and persuasive ecclesiology might prove to be a key element in the church’s renewal and meaningfulness in a postmodern society.

■ I BELIEVE IN THE LAST THINGS

The doctrine of the “last things,” *eschatology*, is perhaps the most difficult doctrine to articulate. There is a great deal that can be said about eschatology, but at the same time, there is very little that can be

32 Ibid., 242.

33 From “Distinctive Wesleyan Emphases” in the *Discipline*.

known with any confidence. In the cross and resurrection of Jesus, we find evidence of the promised deliverance from this life of suffering and death. This hoped-for end gives us courage and orients us across the span of our lifetime. Yet, at the same time, so much of what we consider in this doctrine is highly speculative. What do we really know about the future? What does heaven look like, and will we have physical bodies? If so, what age will we be? When will the final judgment take place? Even questions about things such as whether our beloved pets will be in heaven cross our minds. We cannot answer these questions with any certainty. We can only know what God has revealed and promised to us through Christ and the scriptural witnesses. Nonetheless, if we were to strip away the hope that is found in Christian eschatology, our faith would be rudderless in this world. Hope is the driving, directing force for the faithful.

There are a number of topics that fall within the doctrine of eschatology: the *parousia* (the second coming), the kingdom of God, the resurrection of the body, the final judgment, the life everlasting, heaven and hell, and others. But the central or, perhaps, unifying concept is Christian hope. We intentionally speak of *Christian* hope to suggest that our hope is rooted and grounded in the living God as the unique source of our confidence and faith in a good future, despite the current realities in which we live. Hope, according to Hebrews 6:19, is “a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul.” Christian hope is anchored to and grounded in the nature and promises of God, which not only point us toward a promised good future, but enable us to live with confidence in the present. Glenn Tinder expresses this idea succinctly: “The way we hope is the way we live.”³⁴ More than one theologian has proposed that the doctrine of eschatology is centered in this anchoring function of hope.

While God should be considered the source of our hope, we can

34 Glenn Tinder, *The Fabric of Hope* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 28.

speak more specifically of eschatological claims that serve to buoy our hopefulness. First, the quality of our hope is supported by the promised second coming of Christ, the *parousia*, at which time God will complete the new creation, such that death and suffering will be no more, the wolf will lie down with the lamb, the child will play on the adder's den and not be harmed, and every tear will be wiped away from every eye. The *parousia* points beyond individual restoration toward God's cosmic plan for the reconciliation of the entire created order, a claim that is echoed in the belief in the resurrection of the body. The resurrection of the body reaffirms the goodness of creation and the wholeness or integrity of the human being as body, spirit, and mind. Thus, our hope in the resurrection of the body finds expression in this life as we experience some measure of healing and wholeness, a foretaste of the promised resurrection of the body to new life.

Of course, the resurrection of the body also connects to the concepts of life everlasting and heaven and hell, concepts that have been widely depicted over the centuries but with little evidence, other than a few scriptural references, upon which to base them. We hope in the new heaven and the new earth in which all things will be in right relationship with one another and with God. We understand heaven as a place of joy, well-being, peace, and love. Yet, too, Christians have traditionally held a belief in hell as the antithesis of right relationship, merited as a result of refusing God's grace and choosing to "go it alone" or to deny the need for God and others. In this sense, Migliore aptly defines hell as "self-destructive resistance to the eternal love of God."³⁵ Of course, we do not have a diagram or photograph that shows us the landscape of heaven or hell, though these concepts do symbolize the fundamental choice to live fully in right relationship to

35 Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 347.

God and others or to choose our own small and selfish desires as the fullest expression of life. Perhaps hell is a fiery inferno filled with weeping and gnashing of teeth. Perhaps heaven is a place with harps and white robes and angelic choruses singing alleluias. We simply do not know. So we are left with the free will to choose God or not, whatever the consequences may be. We are free to choose hope in God, which is bolstered by our belief in the *parousia*, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Why we need hope and God's promises leads us to the final doctrine we will discuss in this brief overview: theological anthropology.

WESLEY AND UNITED METHODISTS ON ESCHATOLOGY

On the doctrine of eschatology, both John Wesley and United Methodists tend to follow traditional teachings and provide limited guidance. The Articles of Religion ignore eschatology, and the Confession of Faith offers only Article XII on the Judgment and the Future State:

We believe all men stand under the righteous judgment of Jesus Christ, both now and in the last day. We believe in the resurrection of the dead; the righteous to life eternal and the wicked to endless condemnation.

Wesley likewise devoted little attention to eschatology; perhaps because his focus was practical and concerned with holy living, responding to God's grace in the here-and-now. Nonetheless, Maddox designates Wesley's theology of the last things as "processive eschatology," which "reinforces Wesley's conviction that this present dimension is not a static reality; with every responsive attainment that we reach in salvific transformation God presents a new goal that transcends what has been attained."³⁶ In other words, salvation is seen as the eschatological goal, and we continue to be perfected in love throughout our lifetime.

³⁶ Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 235–36.

Wesley believed in bodily resurrection, in the final judgment in relation to our response to God's offer of grace, heaven "as the opportunity to see God, to know God, and to love God,"³⁷ and in his later sermons, the new creation as cosmic redemption. But overall, United Methodists understand eschatology as the hope of attaining salvation through our continual reliance on God's grace.

■ THE DOCTRINE OF HUMANITY

You may have noticed that this last doctrinal section begins with a heading that differs from the others. It signals that the doctrine of humanity or theological anthropology is not a subject of our faith in the way the other doctrines are. We do believe in the fallenness of humanity that was created in the image of God; we believe in our sinfulness as well, but we do not believe in ourselves as human beings. We are not the subject of our faith. In some respects, we are the problem for which the Christian faith is the answer. Even so, we are also fundamentally part of the answer, for we possess free will and the calling to represent the good news of Jesus Christ to others. I have saved the doctrine of theological anthropology for last simply because it turns our attention back upon ourselves, upon who we are and why we need God. This ordering of doctrines is, of course, a methodological choice as described in chapter 3.

Christians believe that human beings are created in the image of God (in Latin, the *imago Dei*). We were created good, complete, and whole, as described in the creation stories. Genesis 1:27 is a defining text as it depicts our original creation in the image and likeness of God. Theologians through the ages have understood this notion of the image of God in various ways, but generally it points toward a certain moral character and dignity in human beings that reflect the divine nature, if

37 Ibid., 252.

only in part. Sometimes, as well, the image of God is suggestive of the human capacity for reason and reflection, which is not present in the minds of other living creatures or, at least, to the extent that we possess it. Though lost or diminished in the fall from grace, Christians believe in the restoration of this image as part of the redemptive work of Jesus Christ and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Creation in the image of God tells us something about what it means to become fully human as God created us to be.

SIN

And yet, the pervasive reality of sin undermines our created goodness and that image of God implanted in the human being. Sometimes I have heard Christians claim that they do not sin, by which they mean they do not engage in a list of prohibited behaviors such as smoking and stealing. This is, of course, a very narrow and incomplete rendering of the concept of sin. Among the Greek words that can be translated as *sin*, *hamartia* is the most common, and it derives from the notion of “missing the mark,” as an arrow missing a target. In other words, to sin is to fall short, to miss the mark, to turn left when we should turn right. Sin is fundamentally about turning away from God and God’s will or way for our lives. For Augustine, Luther, Bonhoeffer, and others, sin is most poignantly described as the heart turned in upon itself (*incurvatus in se*), rather than outward toward God and others. It is the rejection of the gift of grace. Sin can arise from either self-centeredness or self-denigration, thinking either too highly of ourselves or too little, and it can take the form of sins of commission (action) or omission (inaction).

As noted earlier in this book, the tradition has typically followed the teaching of Augustine that we human beings are not free not to sin, that there is a bondage of our will. How, then, does free will exist or function if our will is in bondage to sin? Tertullian was the first

theologian to refer to free will or the human capacity to decide how we will conduct our lives. Augustine then developed the doctrine, explaining that we do have a measure of free will, even if it is limited by sin, and the restoration of our free will is possible only through God's grace. Sin is a universal condition, as Paul writes to the Romans: "all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin" (3:9). We are aided by God's grace in order to choose not to sin.

When we speak of the bondage of the will, we are also pointing toward the concept of original sin. Christians have long held that original sin is inherited as a result of the disobedience of the first people in the Garden of Eden. While some theologians dispute this belief in original sin, we might reframe it in contemporary terms as a genetic mutation that continues to be passed down to each successive generation. We are not as we were in the beginning. When we consider this inherited predisposition to sin, our attention is focused on the individual. Indeed, throughout most of Christian history, we have viewed sin as primarily an individual concept or something that needs to be addressed individually. The logic is well known: in our confession of Jesus Christ, our individual sins are forgiven. Indeed, each of us is in need of the redemption in Christ.

Even so, since the rise of liberation theologies in the 1970s and beyond, theologians and the church have begun to articulate a concept of systemic sin in addition to individual sin. Systemic sin begins with the notion that the rejection of grace can be structured socially and not just individually. When we begin to reflect upon the systems and institutional arrangements that exist in our world, it becomes clear that sin is not reducible to individual choice alone. For example, suppose you stop at a coffee house and buy a double latte that costs you three or four dollars. If the seller does not indicate that this is fair-trade coffee, it might be the case that the farmers who grew the coffee beans earned pennies a pound for their product. You may feel you have done nothing wrong; all you did was purchase an expensive

cup of coffee. But in doing so, you supported a system that impoverishes the farmer in that distant country. If God seeks the flourishing and fullness of life for all people, then the system that diminishes the farmer's life in order to provide excessive profit to others is sinful, as is our participation in that system. Sinful systems are death-dealing rather than life-giving, which is the way of Jesus Christ. Examples of systemic sin abound, of course. But the point is an important one: sin has a structural dimension as it is woven into institutions of human making, including the church. No doubt systemic sin is complex, since it is difficult to identify the sources of the sin, which are often interwoven in a network of actions and structures, and even more difficult to eradicate. It is also quite difficult for individuals to be conscious of the many ways in which we support sinful systems. Nonetheless, we are called by God to turn away from sin, which means helping to name systemic sin and reject its diminishment of some lives in order to further others. Perhaps you can think of additional examples of systemic sin that your church or you, individually, have sought to change.

HOW UNITED METHODISTS UNDERSTAND SIN

United Methodists take the concept of sin seriously, though some criticize the church for not preaching enough about our sinful nature. First, it's important to distinguish between original sin and actual sins. John Wesley held to humanity's creation in the image of God, in terms of three dimensions—natural, political, and moral—though he emphasized the natural and moral aspects. In his sermon "The New Birth," Wesley describes the natural image as "understanding, freedom of will, and various affections"; the political image as humanity's governance or dominion in the world; and the moral image as righteousness and holiness or the fullness of love.³⁸ In the first people's

38 John Wesley's sermon "The New Birth," §1.1.

fall from grace, this threefold image was defaced or tarnished and must be restored. But the consequences of the fall are the inheritance of original sin: we have “lost both the knowledge and love of God” and have become “unholy as well as unhappy.”³⁹ Original sin thus leads us into pride, self-will, and sensual desires. Our nature as God intended it is corrupted, and we must be born again through faith and the new birth, “that great change which God works in the soul . . . when he raises it from the death of sin to the life of righteousness.”⁴⁰ The corruption of our original nature by original sin means, in keeping with Augustine, that we are not free not to sin. Unaided by grace we cannot overcome our human condition.

Significantly, because our nature is corrupted, we are unable to avoid actual sins, our predisposition is not to act in accordance with God’s will. As Maddox explains,

From this spiritual corruption spring our actual sins, which affect all four relationships definitive of human life. We no longer consistently love and serve either God or humans; we neglect or actively terrorize the “lower” animals; and as a result, our own happiness and self-acceptance drain away.⁴¹

Wesley goes so far as to suggest that prior to repentance and faith, “thy actual sins are more than thou art able to express, more than the hairs of thy head.”⁴² Here Wesley is emphasizing that without the aid of grace, we simply cannot avoid sin and more important, we often don’t even have the capacity to recognize our sins. These actual sins may be voluntary or involuntary.

Voluntary sins—willful disobedience—can be rooted out and

39 Ibid., §I.2.

40 Ibid., §II.5.

41 Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 82.

42 John Wesley’s sermon “The Way to the Kingdom,” §II.3.

avoided by the reliance on God's grace; but involuntary sins based in ignorance, error, illness, and temptation will continue to be present until we are entirely sanctified. In other words, repentance and the forgiveness offered in and through Christ are required throughout our lifetimes; the new birth begins the renewal of our nature, but it does not represent a sinless existence. It is worthwhile to note as well that "The General Rules" provide a practical guide, of sorts, for avoiding voluntary sins by doing no harm, doing good of every possible sort, and attending upon the ordinances of God.

Wesley's understanding of sin is clearly articulated in the Articles of Religion and the Confession of Faith. In the Articles of Religion, Article VII delineates original sin as the corruption of our nature; Article VIII highlights our free will that lacks the power to do what is good without God's grace; Article X states that good works following justification do not serve to counteract or diminish our sins; and Article XII states that sin continues after justification but can be forgiven by grace, repentance, and forgiveness. In its more contemporary spirit, the Confession of Faith offers a very similar accounting of sin in Articles VII, IX, X, and XI. Of note is Article XI, which describes the ongoing nature of "infirmities, ignorance, and mistakes," as well as the "possibilities of further sin." Here the Confession of Faith speaks of actual sins potentially present even in those who are sanctified in this life, thereby confirming the journey of faith as an ongoing process of relying on God's grace throughout our lifetimes.

Finally, a word on the concept of systemic sin. This terminology or concept post-dates John Wesley, the Articles of Religion, and the Confession of Faith. It post-dates the creation of The United Methodist Church. While there are intimations of our concern for systemic sin in the *Book of Discipline*—such as we find in the section on "The Present Challenge to Theology in the Church" where it speaks of societal and systemic injustices to which Christians must respond—whether The United Methodist Church is doctrinally committed to the concept

of systemic sin must remain an open question. Of course, theology and the church's theology is an ongoing task which The United Methodist Church affirms, and so we are left to discern if our understanding of sin as original sin and actual sins should include a concern for systemic sin.

In our struggle to overcome personal and structural sin, Christians believe that God's grace, Christ's atoning work, and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit provide us with a certain freedom from the power and presence, the bondage, of sin. At the center or heart of this freedom is the freedom to be in right relationship with God, other human beings, and the whole of creation. In Christ, we are a new humanity renewed in the image of God, the goodness of our creatureliness, and the fullness of life lived in harmony and balance with all of God's creation. Here, in the midst of this vision of restored humanity and radical relationship, we come to embody and to share the ultimate gift of God's love that never gives up on us, even when we give up on ourselves or others. God is love, a love that never ends, a love qualitatively richer than any expression of human love, a love that is the final word in our journey through the doctrines of the Christian faith. When we reach the end of our thinking, acting, and being, this one thing remains: Love.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ---

1. Reread the Apostles' Creed. Which of the beliefs do you struggle with and why? Has your thinking changed about any of them in the reading of this chapter?
2. How do you understand the fullness of God? And how would you explain the Christian doctrine of one God who is known in three different ways?
3. Which of the doctrines discussed in the chapter do you find most difficult? And which do you find most comforting or illuminating?

4. What does it mean to be human from a Christian perspective?
5. What is distinctive about United Methodist doctrine in the broader tradition of doctrinal understanding?

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

There are a number of systematic theologies, any of which would add to your study of these doctrines. Here are just a few to consider:

Chopp, Rebecca S., and Mark Lewis Taylor, editors. *Reconstructing Christian Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994.

Hodgson, Peter C., and Robert H. King, editors. *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, newly updated edition. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994.

Jones, Serene, and Paul Lakeland, editors. *Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach to the Classical Themes*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005.

McGrath, Alister E. *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, fifth edition. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

Migliore, Daniel L. *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, third edition. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014.

For explicitly Wesleyan and United Methodist resources consider the following:

The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church. Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House (published every four years).

Campbell, Ted A. *Methodist Doctrine: The Essentials*, revised edition. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011.

Maddox, Randy L. *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994.

CONCLUSION

As we arrive at the conclusion of this journey through theology, we return to the title of this volume, *Theology for Ministry*. Theology is not some abstract academic discipline that we endure in our ministry studies in order to put it behind us once we move on to the “real” work of ministry. Rather, theology is essential for the variety of ministries and ministerial tasks. As we conclude, let’s draw out the importance of theology and theological reflection for effective ministry.

- 1. Remember that as pastors, we must develop a deliberative theology.** When we experience the call to ministry, in most cases we have been formed in a way that our understanding, beliefs, and practices tend to be embedded. We have accepted the church’s teachings, but haven’t begun to deeply consider them. As pastors, if we preach and teach an embedded theology, especially in the face of the more difficult questions, our answers are likely to be less satisfying to many church members and to those whom we would bring to faith in Jesus Christ. John Wesley spent a lifetime reflecting on the beliefs of his Christian faith and Methodist movement, often clarifying and refining those beliefs. The United Methodist Church through its *Book of Discipline* provides the Wesleyan Quadrilateral as a means and method of ongoing theological reflection in light of the real world and the practice of ministry.

We, too, are called by God and asked by the church to engage in theological reflection as an invaluable tool for effective ministry.

2. As pastors in the United Methodist tradition, we have a common set of beliefs that we know as our doctrinal standards.

These are the teachings of the faith that are held in common by our community of faith. These are the teachings expressed by John Wesley and adopted by The United Methodist Church in 1972, after four years of studying how best to faithfully represent the doctrines received from the Methodist Church and Evangelical United Brethren Church. As a connectional denomination, we hold a common understanding of the Christian faith, and pastors are asked to teach and uphold our doctrines. Every pastor should understand well and teach his or her congregation what Christians believe, with special attention to what is distinctive about United Methodist beliefs. The growth of Methodism around the world since its humble beginnings in Wesley's England almost three hundred years ago suggests that there is something about our articulation of the faith that rings true in the lives of believers. By faithfully sharing the United Methodist teachings, we may find that people continue to be drawn by grace to take this journey of salvation.

3. Teaching and preaching, even sharing in the church's newsletter, what United Methodists believe is an important dimension of forming our congregations as disciples of Jesus Christ.

If church members aren't regularly taught the Christian faith in church, they will develop an embedded theology rooted in a whole host of beliefs available on the open market of today's spirituality. If the pastor doesn't teach a United Methodist congregation what United Methodists hold to be true, no one will teach them. Moreover, the central means of formation in any church is the sermon, since this is where the largest numbers of members will be present over the course of a year. Therefore, over a two- or

three-year period, church pastors should ensure they cover the wide range of doctrinal understandings, helping the church to grow in its understanding. Have you taught about faith? What about theodicy? Grace? Sanctification? What have you said about the Holy Spirit? Have you spoken about the atonement? Keeping track of the theological doctrines you've shared from the pulpit is a simple way to pay attention to whether or not you are providing the congregation with a deep and broad formation in what we believe. Remember, this is a central task for the pastor in forming his or her congregation as disciples who will take the gospel into the world every week.



If the pastor doesn't teach a United Methodist congregation what United Methodists hold to be true, no one will teach them.

We have come to the end of this brief consideration of theology and its importance for pastoral ministry. I am reminded of one of my favorite quotations from John Wesley, found in his sermon "On Working Out Our Own Salvation." Wesley, in arguing for the response we must make to God's offer of grace, says this: "Stir up the spark of grace which is now in you, and [God] will give you more grace."¹ Our journey of growing in understanding the most deeply held beliefs of our faith, just like our journey of salvation, is fed and fueled over and over again by the grace of God. God is always faithful. If we stir up the spark, if we do our part, God will help us to grow and flourish and to help others do the same, for the sake of the world and its transformation toward healing and wholeness.

1 John Wesley's sermon "On Working Out Our Own Salvation," §III.6.

INDEX

- Abelard, Peter, 28, 155, 156
Anabaptism, 59
analogy, 17, 79
Anselm of Canterbury, 134–35
apologetics, 39, 40, 42, 45, 65, 143
Aquinas, Thomas, 26, 27, 51, 96, 129, 134
Arianism, 154
Arminianism, 58, 63
assurance, 64, 109, 110, 129, 130, 168
atonement, 58, 64, 71, 151, 154, 155–58, 161
Augustine, 4, 24, 41, 44, 45, 46–48, 50, 51, 56, 58, 73, 96, 113, 138, 140–41, 170, 176, 186–87, 189

baptism, 46, 47, 59, 60, 88, 175
Barth, Karl, 63, 67–68, 73, 108, 118, 127, 135, 174
Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, 63, 66–67, 142, 175–176, 186
Brueggemann, Walter, 171–72

Calvin, John, 17, 37, 52, 56–58, 63, 64, 67, 102
Chrysostom, John, 25
Cone, James, 69, 88, 119
Congar, Yves, 27
Council of Nicaea, 40, 41, 44, 46, 154
creation, 70, 106, 132, 140, 141–43, 165
critical reflection, 5

crucifixion, 151, 154–55, 157, 175, 176
Cyprian, 113, 175

deism, 109, 135
Descartes, Rene, 60–61
Docetism, 153, 155
doctrine, 3, 7, 22, 35–37, 38–39
Donatists, 46–47

ecclesia, 173
election, 57, 58, 63
epistemology, 61, 84
Evangelicalism, 71, 109
evil, 18, 42, 139–41; moral, 141; natural, 141
existentialism, 66
experience, 63, 64, 66, 90, 109–11, 112, 162

faith, 54, 128–31, 144, 145, 163
Farley, Edward, 23
Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler, 96–97

Gilkey, Langdon, 139
Gnosticism, 158
grace, 41, 48, 53, 58, 63–64, 130, 144–45, 162–63, 166, 195

hermeneutics, 25, 48, 84, 95–97
Holy Communion, 42, 60, 163, 175

INDEX

- Hume, David, 61
- immanence, 135, 136–37
- incarnation, 157–58, 174
- Irenaeus, 45, 139
- Johnson, Elizabeth, 88, 164–66
- justification, 53–55, 100, 130, 144, 153, 162, 190
- Kant, Immanuel, 61–62, 103
- Kierkegaard, Søren, 65–66
- language, 17, 76–77, 80–82, 165, 173;
 expansive, 81–82; gender-neutral, 80; inclusive, 80
- liberalism, 64, 65, 108
- Lombard, Peter, 28, 51
- Luther, Martin, 53–56, 129
- Manichaeism, 140
- Marcion, 152–53
- McFague, Sallie, 70–71, 136
- McGrath, Alister, 25, 49, 106, 128
- Means of Grace, 162–63
- Messiah, 45, 92, 148
- metaphor, 17, 70, 77–79, 82, 99
- method, 8, 24–25, 75, 76, 83
- Migliore, Daniel, 87, 92–92, 94, 183
- Minear, Paul, 173
- Moltmann, Jürgen, 127, 166
- New Birth, 188–89, 190
- Noll, Mark, 71
- norm, 89–90, 94
- Ogden, Schubert, 87–88
- Origen, 23, 24, 96
- orthodoxy, 40, 44, 49, 67
- panentheism, 136
- pantheism, 136
- Pelagius, 41, 47
- Pelikan, Jaroslav, 36–37, 42, 44, 50, 53
- perichoresis, 138
- Philo of Alexandria, 24
- pneumatology, 164
- Polkinghorne, John, 143
- predestination, 14, 56, 57
- prolegomena, 29, 76
- quadrilateral. *See* Wesleyan Quadrilateral.
- reason, 26, 28, 50, 52, 60, 61, 62, 103–4, 108
- repentance, 130, 144, 162, 190
- resurrection, 151, 158–59, 176; of the body, 182–83, 184
- revelation, 89, 106–7, 147; general, 107, 133; special, 107, 133
- sacraments, 46, 56, 175, 180
- salvation, 33, 42, 49, 53, 57, 64, 100, 113, 130–31, 151, 160–63, 175–76
- sanctification, 130–31, 144, 145, 162, 165, 168
- Schleiermacher, Friedrich, 29, 64–65, 110
- Scholasticism, 27, 50
- sin, 41, 43, 47, 53, 69, 151, 162, 186–87; actual, 189–90; original, 18, 187, 189; systemic, 43, 70, 187–88, 190
- sola fide, 54–55
- sola scriptura, 52, 55, 64, 90, 91
- soteriology, 42, 49, 119, 146, 161
- symbol, 68, 69, 131–32, 158
- Tertullian, 45, 46, 186
- theodicy, 42, 139
- theology, 3, 12, 28; deliberative, 6–7, 34, 55, 77, 80, 193; embedded, 6, 12, 14, 34, 77, 81, 86, 193; practical, 29, 30; systematic, 19, 22–23, 29, 117, 125

- Tillich, Paul, 68–69, 118, 134, 166
- tradition, 44, 49, 52, 90, 101–3
- transcendence, 118, 135–36
- Trinity, 20, 40, 45, 137–38, 153, 176;
 - economic, 138, 164; essential/
 - immanent, 137, 165
- TULIP, 58, 63
- Wesleyan Quadrilateral, 15, 90, 111–12, 193
- Wiles, Maurice, 39, 41
- witness of the Spirit, 109, 168
- works-righteousness, 53, 56

